

INTERCULTURAL NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SERBIAN COMMUNICATIONS STUDENTS

Marta MITROVIĆ

Assistant, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communications and Journalism, University of Niš, Serbia
e-mail: marta.mitrovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Marija VUJOVIĆ

Assistant, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communications and Journalism, University of Niš, Serbia
e-mail: marija.vujovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Abstract

Using non-verbal communication, people convey information, emotions, express views, intentions and expectations regardless of gender, race, origin or culture. They do this with conscious or subconscious gestures, bodily movements and facial expressions that are often culturally predetermined, in addition to those which are biologically inborn. When we observe the surveys that say that the meaning of the message being conveyed depends largely on non-verbal communication, it is clear how important it is for the process of establishing interpersonal relationships and how much the differences in such communication can create misunderstanding among people from different cultures. This paper investigates concrete examples by describing culturally specific types of non-verbal communication. The aim of this research is to determine the extent to which the culture and the predetermined non-verbal communication could lead to misunderstanding. The initial hypotheses are that non-verbal communication significantly affects the communication process among people from different cultures and the differences in non-verbal communication lead to misunderstanding among people from different cultures. The scientific method used in this paper is Virtual Snowball Sampling, while the data collection instrument was a questionnaire. The survey was conducted on a sample of 112 respondents who were the students of communications at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis, Serbia. This research has shown that Even though the respondents had some misunderstandings with people from other cultures due to the non-verbal communication issues, which can be explained by the fact that these are communication professionals, almost two-

thirds of them emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication for understanding among the people from different cultures.

Keywords: *Non-verbal communication, international communication, culture, students of communications.*

Introduction

If, by chance, a Japanese, an Iranian and an American would find themselves on a deserted island, and, due to the language barrier, would be able to use only non-verbal communication, there could be some major misunderstandings. This could happen due to the diversity of cultures they come from and due to the different meanings of the gestures used.

“Surveys on communication between human beings show that the information exchanged between two people is on average determined by the following: 15% by the content itself, 35% by the tone of voice, 50% by behaviour and by physical appearance” (Iris, 1999, p.32). Thus, non-verbal communication is an extremely important aspect of communication among people, and it is especially important to recognise non-verbal cues in communication process between people coming from different geographic areas so as to avoid any misunderstanding of the messages being conveyed. Intercultural communication becomes especially important with the development of globalization (Tiechuan, 2016). Different cultures have different ways of communication. The man is simply not born as a cultural being. Culture is learned, and this includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, which are also affected by the globalization of the media (Miglietta&Tartaglia, 2009).

Non-verbal communication

Communication is an inseparable part of human society and the life of every individual. It is one of the most complex, most comprehensive and dynamic activities. It is through the process of communication that human societies, as well as mutual relations, are constantly being constituted and self-renewed. By its global character, communication permeates all human activities. From the standpoint of communications, the man is “animal symbolicum”, who constantly builds the world of information (symbols, words), the world which he lives in.

Communication among people can be verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication is the spoken language, the basic and most important communication tool. By using words and their combinations, people communicate their emotions, knowledge, opinions. In addition to verbal communication, man also uses non-verbal communication signs. We can stop

talking, but it is simply impossible to stop sending and receiving non-verbal messages, at least according to the pansemiotic view proposed by Goffman (Goffman, 1963). While we use verbal communication mainly to transmit information, we use non-verbal communication to express the attitudes and emotions based on the information we receive or on the attitude towards the person with whom we communicate. "Non-verbal communication is especially superior when expressing emotions which are expressed with the highest degree of sincerity" (Radojković&Miletić, 2005: 45). What is common in verbal and non-verbal communication is the existence of a coded system of characters. "Both of them allow the creation of meaningful symbolic entities, encoding and exchange of messages, i.e. communication... However, as a rule, non-verbal communication interweaves with verbal language by preparing it, regulating it, complementing, intensifying, contradicting or altering the meaning of words" (Radojković&Miletić, 2005:51). In fact, the relationship between non-verbal and verbal communication can be more or less conditioned. "Thus, for example, some gestures amplify the language only if they follow it, while other's are carriers of meaning are independent of language" (Nöth, 2004, p. 296). When we talk about non-verbal communication, we mean facial and bodily movements, spatial relations and the environment where communication happens. It can be defined as "interpersonal exchange of information with means other than words" (Kostić, 2008, p. 23) or as non-verbal behaviour that includes "...all the information that we obtain by observing facial expressions and bodily movements and listening to the voice tone" (Kostić, 2008, p. 19). Or, "Communication without words represents human behaviour using signs ... it encompasses the expressive potential of the human body in time and space" (Nöth, 2004, p. 293). The human body is the carrier of meaning. Many theoreticians give up attempting a precise definition, but agree that it is about face-to-face communication, about bilateral communication, and it implies the presence of the one who sends and the one who receives the message. Besides the communicator (encoder) and the decoder, non-verbal communication also includes a common, social code. This is a prerequisite for mutual understanding.

Intercultural non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication and the signs that a person uses can be common to all people in the world, regardless of gender, age, skin colour, origin. This mostly relates to the expression of emotions such as happiness, fear, anger, sadness, surprise and disgust (Kostić, 2006). However, many communication signs that a person uses are the result of learning. As such, they are largely culturally predetermined. "The whole range of everyday behaviour indicates that people from different cultures essentially think in

different ways and express it not only with language, but also with numerous non-verbal signs: gestures, touch, space perception, time perception, timing, and many other methods that are called cultural behaviour” (Janićijević, 2000, p. 292). Many other authors have written about cultural differences in non-verbal communication (Kim, 2001; Liu et al, 2014).

In order to make specific differences in the non-verbal communication among people from different cultures, it is necessary to determine the types of non-verbal communication signs. They can be paralinguistic, that is, non-verbal vocalisations that accompany verbal message such as pauses in speech, speech speed, volume, tone of voice. Unlike these, there are also extra-linguistic non-verbal communication signs that are divided into kinesic signs that include facial and bodily movements, and into proxemics that deals with the amount of space that people feel it necessary to set between themselves and others. Besides kinesic and proxemics signs, there is a special group of signs that includes physical appearance, smell, and various forms of physical contact (Knapp et al, 2013).

This paper will not mention all of the aforementioned types of non-verbal communication signs, but only some culturally preconditioned signs, due to the limited length of work. We have made the decision to deal only with non-verbal communication between the people of different cultures because the people from the same culture share the same or similar non-verbal gestures; therefore, the assumption is that culture-specific non-verbal reactions will be a more significant factor in understanding or misunderstanding between people of different cultures.

Speaking of kinesic non-verbal communication signs, we primarily refer to mimics and gestures. Facial expressions also include eye contact with other people which differ from nation to nation. “Arabs and many peoples of South America, as well as people from the south of Europe, have considerably more eye contact with each other. Given that these nations have more physical contact during the communication process (contact with certain body parts of the interlocutor, hugs, kissing), and more eye contact, some anthropologists say that they belong to “the contact culture”. In other nations, for example, the US population, the Japanese and the peoples of northern Europe, there is considerably less eye contact during the interaction. These cultures even consider eye contact inappropriate, and the excessive looking at someone is always seen as impolite and a sign of unpleasant intrusiveness” (Rot, 1982, p. 165).

It is possible to distinguish high-contact cultures such as Central and Southern Europe, South America and the Middle East, while Asia, Northern Europe and North America are seen as less contact cultures (Knapp et al, 2013). Roth also states that in some cultures it is forbidden to have direct visual contact with certain people, in Kenya with your mother-in-law, in

Nigeria with a person in a higher position on the social ladder, and in some Indian tribes of South America it is never polite to gaze at the person during the conversation, while the Japanese look at the shoulder of the person they talk to (Rot, 1982).

However, the most common and frequently used non-verbal communication signs are the gestures. "Gestures usually include movements of the limbs, arms, hands and fingers, then the legs, feet, head. A gesture represents the motor and communicative use of certain parts of the body and it should be considered a symbol. The meaning that is achieved by using signs is determined by the context in which the gesture is used" (Jovanović & Zdravković: 2017, p. 200).

We recognize and distinguish the gestures that Desmond Morris calls regional signals. "Regional signal is the gesture with a limited geographic scope[...] Every person receives from his/her own culture a specific set of regional signals – gestures that might mean nothing to the people from other cultures" (Morris, 1979, p. 149). The boundaries of understanding regional gestures do not match administrative country boundaries. Some characteristic differences according to this author include the gesture when the English are tapping the side of the nose with the index finger means "we share a secret", something very confidential (we are sneaky), while in central Italy this gesture is used to indicate incoming danger, warning someone to be careful (they are sneaky). The act of pulling down the skin beneath the eye with the index finger, in England and France means "you cannot fool me, I can see through you" (I am careful), while in Italy it means – be careful, he is a fraud (you should be careful). Brushing the hand under the chin in a forward flicking motion is seen as an offensive gesture in France and northern Italy and it means "get lost, you bore me", while in southern Italy it is not seen as offensive and it means: I cannot, I need nothing, there is nothing new (Morris, 1979, p. 149-152).

Some of the gestures that cause misunderstandings among different nations are the movement of the head forwards and backwards which the majority of European nations use to convey a confirmation while in Greece and Bulgaria it means negation. The gesture when we people use their thumb and forefinger to form a circle while the remaining three fingers are spread up in the US means OK, in Japan money, in France zero, and in Mexico it means sex. In Ethiopia it signifies homosexuality, while in some Southern America countries it is an offensive gesture that means the same as the middle finger in the US. In America, thumb up means OK, while in South America it is an offensive gesture. There are many similar differences in the use of gestures among the different nations, but while the linguistic maps are quite clear, very little is known about such gesture maps.

Kinesic non-verbal communication signs include the posture. "Many cultures have prescribed rules for the posture in certain situations. For example, there are posture rules during the dinner, during the lectures, and at the funeral" (Rot, 1982, p. 171).

How frequent and intense non-verbal communication will be also depends on the particular culture. In some parts of the world, such as Arabic countries, the response is more open and intense, while in others, like Japan, it is more reserved, and the manifestation of some emotions is controlled and restrained. "In Japan, it is stated in the expert views of the request and the ideal is to control facial expressions, and especially negative emotions such as grief and anger. "It is stated that in Japan, the ideal is to control facial expressions, especially negative emotions such as grief and anger. The conventional smile is used in order to conceal these emotions" (Rot, 1982, p. 115). Surveys show that the stereotypes we have about the temperament of some nations are often true. "As psychologists' surveys have shown, Finnish people make 1 gesture during one minute conversation, Italians 80 gestures, French 120, and Mexican people 170" (Radojković & Miletić, 2005, p. 47).

When it comes to proxemic non-verbal communication signs that relate to spatial relations among the participants in the communication process, there are also differences among the people from different cultures. A survey conducted in the United States by Hall in 1966 divided the personal distance we keep from other into 4 main zones: intimate (15cm - 45cm), personal (45cm - 80cm), social (45cm - 4m) and public distance (4m and more). Unlike the Americans, the Arabs and Latin American people are closer to each other when communicating, while the English and Japanese keep more distance. Not keeping the acceptable distance in a culture can lead to misunderstandings. "People from a country where people are closer to one another while communicating could see the tendency of the interlocutor to keep the distance characteristic of his/her culture as an expression of disrespect and underestimation" (Rot, 1982, p. 176).

There are significant differences between cultures when it comes to physical contact during communication. For example, in India and China, there is no contact among interlocutors, unless they are close to one another. This does not apply to Arabs and Mediterranean people. With the Western people, only the handshake is acceptable, and even that is often avoided. Latin Americans, however, see a simple handshake as something very impersonal, a gesture with no affection. They use a greeting called "doble abrazo", where two people embrace each other by putting the hand on the other one's shoulder. It is unimaginable for an American that someone should touch him/her during the conversation" (Janićjević, 2000, p. 293).

Janićjević mentions another difference that does not belong to the listed types of non-verbal communication gestures, but which is important for

intercultural communication. It is the chronological code, or the different use of time by people. Namely, the notion of time, respect for accuracy is different for people from different cultures. For example, the Americans find it extremely important to respect the timetable and appointments. Americans start the meetings exactly on time. On the other hand, in South America or in the Middle East, people are very flexible when it comes to time and punctuality. Waiting in an office for several hours is a common thing for them and no one is angry about it. An American would see this as an insult and the business would not be considered. "Unlike the precise, accurate and programmed Americans, people in the Middle East all work not based on any schedule. The very thought of the deadline is unimaginable and it has some kind of an emotional effect on the Arabs. If you ask him to do something by a certain deadline, he will not do it at all, on principle" (Janićijević, 2000, p. 301).

Research methodology

The aim of the research was to determine the extent to which the culture as a predetermining and non-verbal communication that stems from a certain culture lead to misunderstandings among the interlocutors. In line with this objective, hypotheses have been established which say that non-verbal communication affects the communication process among the people from different cultures and that the differences in non-verbal communication lead to misunderstandings among the people from different cultures.

The scientific method used in this paper is Virtual Snowball Sampling. The survey of 100 respondents, communications students at the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis, Serbia, was conducted. The surveyor's assumption was that these students are more communicative and better accustomed with the communication skills than others students. Given the choice of their future profession, it is expected that communications students will have better communication skills.

The data collection tool was a questionnaire containing eleven questions, six of which were Likert-type five-point scale, and five more questions with offered answers. The questionnaire was distributed via the social network Facebook. The questionnaire was filled out anonymously, between 5th and 15th July 2017. The Virtual Snowball Sampling method that was used is one of the most suitable methods for the surveys on social networks. The questionnaire is placed on the Internet, and a link to it is provided. Selected respondents further propose and invite new respondents, according to the previously agreed criteria. The data is further collected one after another (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Results

The eleven questions asked in the questionnaire were answered in the following way by the respondents, students of communications:

The question “Have you ever communicated with someone from another country and culture” was answered positively by all the respondents. So, there was no negative answer. There was the difference in the ways communication was achieved. Indirect communication (via Internet, telephone, in writing, etc.) was done by only 1.8% of respondents, 37.5% communicated directly (face to face), while both types of communication (indirect and direct) was done by the highest percentage of respondents - 60,7%.

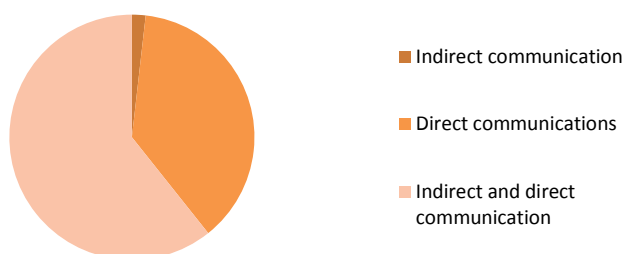


Figure 1: Have you ever communicated with someone from another country and culture and which is the way communication is achieved?

The question “How often do you communicate with someone from another country/culture” was answered with “once a week” by 39.3% of respondents, “once a month” by 25%, and “once a year” by 28.6%. It is important to mention that there were no respondents who never communicate, but it is interesting that 7.1% communicate once in several years. None of the respondents responded negatively to this question. They all communicate with people from different cultures.

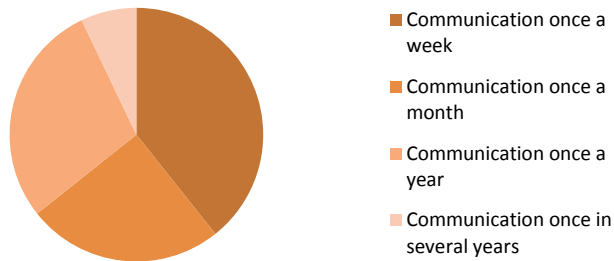


Figure 2: How often do you communicate with someone from another country/culture?

The question “Have you ever communicated with someone from another culture and the discussion ended with a misunderstanding” was answered negatively by 67.9% of respondents, while 32.1% of them answered this question with “yes”. It happened more often that our respondents misunderstood the person they spoke to - that happened in 21.4% of cases, while 10.7% of them were misunderstood.

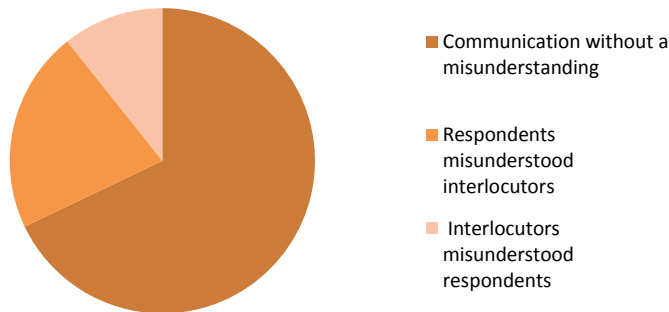


Figure 3: Have you ever communicated with someone from another culture and the discussion ended with a misunderstanding?

The question “What was the cause of misunderstanding in the intercultural communication you participated in”, the highest percentage of people (21.4%) answered “verbal misunderstanding”, that is, misunderstanding of the vocabulary and language used, the next reason was “verbal and non-verbal misunderstanding” (7.1% of respondents), while the least percentage of respondents said the reason was “non-verbal

communication” (body language, gestures, etc.) – 3.6%. As already mentioned, there were no misunderstandings in 67.9% of cases.

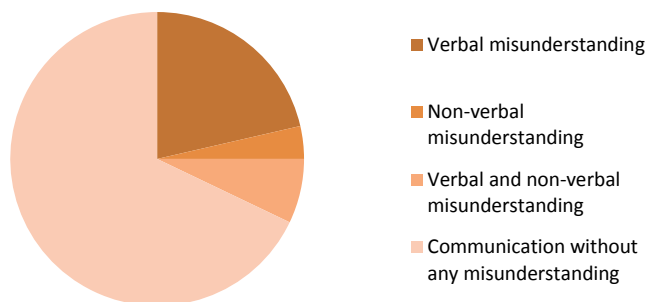


Figure 4: What was the cause of misunderstanding in the intercultural communication you participated in?

Even when personal communication is not used, the respondents believe that in everyday intercultural communication among people, the most common type of misunderstanding was verbal, in as much as 80.4% of cases, while non-verbal misunderstanding occurred in 19.6% of cases.

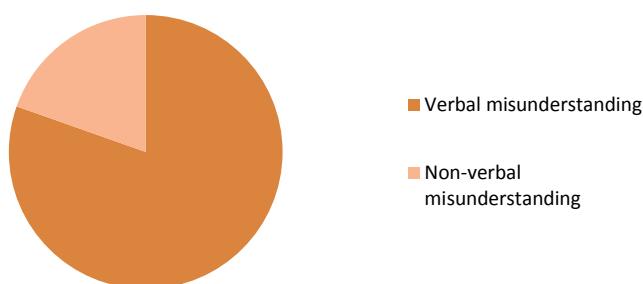


Figure 5: What usually is the cause of misunderstanding among people in the intercultural communication?

However, despite the fact that non-verbal communication was the least frequent cause of misunderstandings between the respondents and the people from other cultures, the question “Is non-verbal communication important to understand that people from other cultures”, 50% of respondents said that they agree, 26.8% of them strongly agree, 14.3% strongly disagree, 8.9% disagree, while 1.8% of respondents have no opinion.

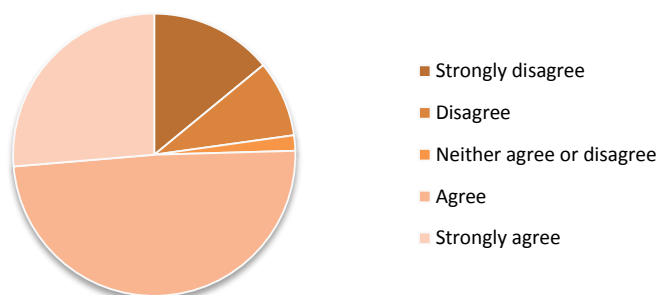


Figure 6: Non-verbal communication is important to understand among the people from other cultures.

Similar to the above, the question “Do the differences in non-verbal communication among the people from different cultures can cause barriers in communication”, 48.9% respondents said that they agree, 16.8% strongly agree, 11.4% strongly disagree, 13.2% disagree, while 9.6% of respondents have no opinion.

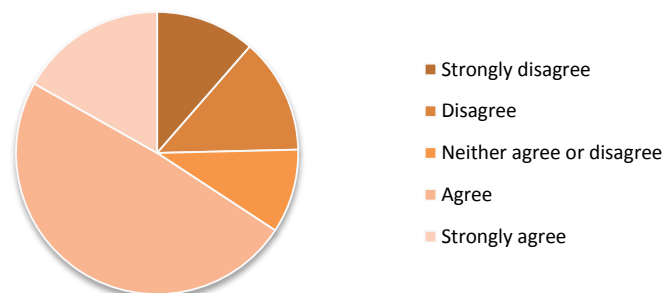


Figure 7: Differences in non-verbal communication among the people from different cultures can cause barriers in communication.

Moreover, the assertion that the same non-verbal communication among the people from different cultures can overcome misunderstandings caused by language differences, 57.4% of respondents agree, 18.5% strongly agree, 11.1% strongly disagree, 5.6% disagree, while 7.4% of respondents have no opinion.

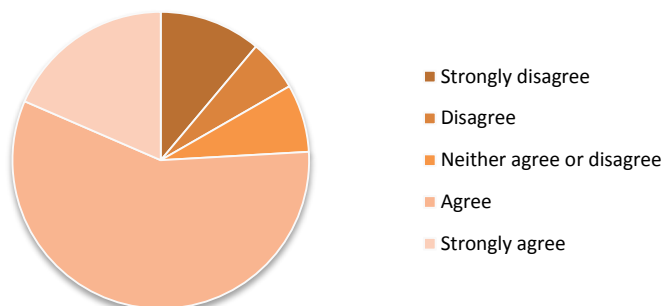


Figure 8: The same non-verbal communication among the people from different cultures can overcome misunderstandings caused by language differences.

When assessing which type of non-verbal communication is the most important, the respondents point out the mimicry (facial expressions). For them, it was extremely important in 46.4% of cases, important in 48.2%, neither important nor irrelevant in 5.4% of cases. There were no respondents who considered this kind of communication to be unimportant or completely irrelevant.

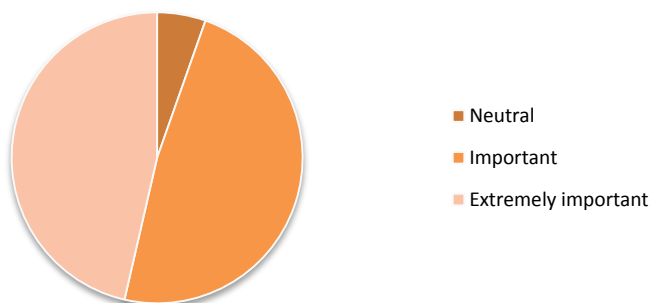


Figure 9: How important is the mimic in non-verbal communication?

After the mimicry, the respondents emphasize the importance of gestures (bodily movements). It is extremely important for 35.7% of them, important for 50%, neither important nor irrelevant for 14.3% of them. There were no respondents who considered the gestures as unimportant or completely irrelevant.

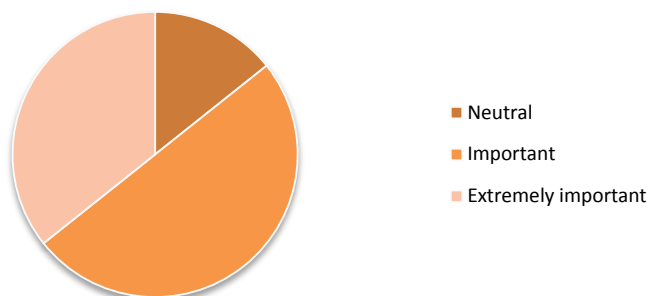


Figure 10: How important is the gestures in non-verbal communication?

The least significant relations are spatial relations among the participants in non-verbal communication (the distance between interlocutors, seating arrangement, etc.). It is considered extremely important in 25% of cases, important in 55.4% of cases, and neither important nor irrelevant in 17.9% of cases. There were no respondents who considered the gestures as irrelevant, however, 1.8% of respondents believe that spatial relations are completely irrelevant.

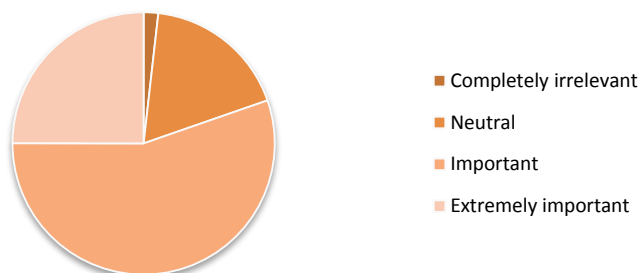


Figure 11: How important is the spatial relations among the participants in non-verbal communication?

Discussion

The significance of this paper is reflected in the fact that this is actually the first research conducted with university students in Serbia which involves the survey of their opinions on the importance of

intercultural non-verbal communication. However, given the small sample of respondents, the results cannot be generalized and can only apply to communications students who were the respondents in this research.

The first significant piece of information obtained by this study was that there were no respondents who did not communicate with people from other cultures. The fact that most of the contacts were done directly, face to face, could be surprising in the era of domination of Internet communication. On the other hand, it is not surprising that such communication continues in the virtual world. Two-way, direct and indirect communication is the dominant one in more than half of the respondents. When it comes to the frequency of intercultural communication, it is encouraging that this is a frequent type of communication, present on a weekly basis for most of the respondents. On the other hand, 7.1% of respondents participate in this type of communication once in a few years. Two-thirds of the respondents had no communication issues, and among those who had misunderstandings, twice as many respondents misunderstood their interlocutors, rather than themselves being the misunderstood ones. The largest number of these misunderstandings was verbal in nature, while non-verbal comprised only 3.6%

However, five times more respondents believe that non-verbal communication is the cause of misunderstanding among the people from different cultures, and even two-thirds of respondents believe that this type of communication is important, and that the differences in non-verbal communication among the people from different cultures can lead to communication issues; on the other hand, non-verbal communication among the people from different cultures can help overcome misunderstandings caused by language differences. Most of the respondents emphasize that mimicry is the most important type of non-verbal communication. Gestures are the second most important, while spatial relations are seen as the least important ones.

Even though the respondents had some misunderstandings with people from other cultures due to the non-verbal communication issues, almost two-thirds of them emphasized the importance of non-verbal communication for understanding among the people from different cultures.

People spend most of their time communicating with other people. While verbal communication refers to the words used in the conversation, non-verbal communication consists of a set of characters, each of which has its meaning. These characters can change, confirm or deny what we say. That is why the way we say something, our posture and our looks, significantly affect the message we are trying to convey to another person. Non-verbal communication can often be the cause of conflicts. Many conflicts begin with

non-verbal message misunderstanding. There are countless scenarios when we ourselves misinterpret someone's statement, precisely because of the ignorance of non-verbal signs. It is therefore very important to pay attention to both our own and our interlocutor's non-verbal language. Non-verbal communication could be the key to successful communication.

International communication in the 21st century is more important than ever due to the process of globalization and everything that it brings with itself. That is why it is important to know the world languages, verbal language, but, bearing in mind the significance of the matter it seems that it is even more important to know non-verbal signs and all cultural specifics. This is the only way to minimize as much as possible the misunderstanding during the communication process between the people from different cultures. Globalization, especially globalization of the media, has facilitated the intercultural non-verbal communication. Thanks to the movies, magazines, global television channels, culturally specific signs of non-verbal communication become multicultural phenomena.

Bibliography

- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social research update*, 33(1), 1-4. [online] Retrieved on 12 April 2016 on: <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU33.pdf>.
- Baltar, F., & Brunet, I. (2012). Social research 2.0: virtual snowball sampling method using Facebook. *Internet Research*, Vol. 22, Issue 1, 57-74.
- Desmond, M. (1994). *Body talk: A World Guide to Gestures*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in Public Places*. New York: Free Press.
- Hall, E. T. (1982). *The hidden dimension*. Garden City, N. Y: Doubleday and Company.
- Iris, A. (1999). *Informacione magistrale*. Beograd: Clio.
- Janićijević, J. (2000). *Komunikacija i kultura*. Sremski Karlovci: Izdavačka knjižarnica Zorana Stojanovića.
- Jovanović, M., & Zdravković, D. (2017). Nonverbal communication and physical education classes in a social context. *Facta universitatis Series: Physical Education and Sport*, Vol. 15, No 1, 2017, 195 – 206.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. Sage.
- Knapp, M. L., Hall, J. A., & Horgan, T. G. (2013). *Nonverbal communication in human interaction*. Cengage Learning.

- Kostić, A. (2006). Govor lica. Niš: Filozofski fakultet.
- Kostić, A. (ur.) (2008). Govor bez reči. Niš: Filozofski fakultet.
- Liu, S., Volcic, Z., & Gallois, C. (2014). Introducing intercultural communication: Global cultures and contexts. Sage.
- Matsumoto, D. (2006). Culture and nonverbal behavior. Handbook of nonverbal communication, 219-235.
- Matsumoto, D. & Hysungm C. H. (2013). Culture and nonverbal communication. In J. Hall & L. M. Knapp (Eds.), Nonverbal Communication (pp. 697-727). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Miglietta, A. & Tartaglia, S. (2009). The influence of length of stay, linguistic competence, and media exposure in immigrants' adaptation. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 43(1), 46-61. [online] Retrieved on 15 April 2016 on: [file:///C:/Users/Personal/Downloads/doc1_7091_850323235%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Personal/Downloads/doc1_7091_850323235%20(1).pdf).
- Morris, D. (1979). Otkrivanje čoveka kroz gestove i ponašanje. Beograd: Jugoslavija.
- Nöth, W. (2004). Priručnik semiotike. Zagreb: Ceres.
- Radojković, M. & Miletić, M. (2005). Komuniciranje, mediji i društvo. Novi Sad: Stylos.
- Rot, N. (1982). Znakovi i značenja. Beograd: Nolit.
- Tiechuan, M. (2016). A Study on Nonverbal Communication in Cross-culture. *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (AJHSS)*, 4(1). [online] Retrieved on 20 December 2016 on: <http://ajhss.org/pdfs/Vol4Issue1/1.pdf>.