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A Study on Chinese Understandability and Learning Ability of Japanese and American Facial Expressions and Emblems

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Abstract:

This paper considers Chinese understand ability and learn ability of Japanese and American facial expressions and emblems. And it aims to verify one of Hoffer and Akiyama's hypotheses that if the facial expressions and emblems are to be learned by non-natives, the latter will be better memorized and maintained than the former by non-natives. That is, emblems will be learned in less time than that of the facial expressions. The statistical results of our study indicate that Chinese college students could better understand Japanese facial expressions studied here than American facial expressions. Also, our research shows that it is easier for Chinese college students to learn facial expressions than emblems in a given time.

Keywords: Verbal communication, non-verbal communication, emblem

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that within the next decade or two the human species will establish communication with another species: nonhuman, alien, and possible extra-territorial, more probably marine; but definitely highly intelligent (Akmajian et al. 1984). We have no idea how human species will establish communication with these highly intelligent species. This statement, however, indicates that human beings have strong desire to communicate with other species.

Generally speaking, there are two types of communicative channels: verbal and nonverbal. By verbal we mean 'spoken.' That is, sounds have to be uttered in order to communicate with others. Nonverbal communication channels, according to Tannen (1986), refer to proxemic, kinesic, facial expressions and gesture.

To communicate well with people from a different culture, one has to be proficient in verbal communication and sensitive to non-verbal communicative channels. With the aid of non-verbal communicative channels, some of gaps may be bridged in verbal communication. In this paper, we are concerned with two aspects of non-verbal communicative channels: facial expressions and emblems. An emblem is a gesture with an independent meaning. To better communicate with Japanese and Americans, it is vital for Chinese to understand and learn their facial expressions and emblems. Therefore, this paper will consider Chinese understandability and learnability of Japanese and American facial expressions and emblems.

Hoffer and Akiyama (1988-1989) postulated three hypotheses concerning the cross-cultural comprehension of facial expressions and emblems between the Japanese and Americans. The hypotheses were as follows:

- Some of the basic facial expressions of our emotions are mutually comprehensible for both parties while others are not.
- Emblems which are highly culturally-bound are incomprehensible to non-natives. A sub-heading of this is: culture-bound emblems will not be comprehended unless the meaning is taught, even when they have often been shown through mass media and seen as part of interpersonal communication.
- If these facial expressions and emblems are to be learned by non-natives, the latter will be better memorized and maintained than the former by non-natives. That is, emblems will be learned in less time than that of the facial expressions.
- These hypotheses had been verified by Akiyama in 1991 by using the informants including American, Japanese, and Korean. Assuming these hypotheses are universally valid, they should be applicable to Chinese. To examine if hypotheses (2) and (3) are valid and to learn understandability of Japanese and American facial expressions and emblems, Japanese and American DOFA (Development of Facial Awareness) and DOGA (Development of Gestural Awareness) tests were taken by Chinese. A week after DOFA and DOGA tests, American and Japanese DOFA Post-test and DOGA Post-test were taken so that students' learnability can be learned.

2. Methods

In this study, 34 subjects were selected; they are all freshmen studying Business Administration at I-Shou University. The study was conducted in May, 2020. In a language laboratory, they were shown a video clip in which Miss Kayoko Tsuchiya, one of Akiyama's students, performed ten different Japanese facial expressions and fifteen different Japanese emblems which are highly culturally bound. Also, in the same video clip, Susan Gilliams (She is often called Sam)

performed ten different American facial expressions and fifteen different American emblems. The facial expressions performed by Kayoko are the same as these performed by Sam. By the way, the Japanese part of the video clip was made by Akiyama and the American part of that by Hoffer.

To test Chinese students' understandability of facial expressions and emblems performed by Kayoko and Sam, the multiple-choice questions for DOFA test and the descriptive questions for DOGA test were taken. A week later, the form of descriptive questions of DOFA Post-test and DOGA Post-test was taken in order to understand students' learnability of facial expressions and emblems performed by Kayoko and Sam.

3. Results and Discussion

The statistical results of DOFA test and DOGA test in Akiyama Nonverbal Communication (NVC) are shown in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively. The table indicates not only the percentage of correctness but also the percentage of some of the distinguishing misreading or misinterpretations.

Akiyama NVC Results	
% Correct	
Happiness	100
Anger	88.2
Surprise	91.1
Fear	97.1
Disgust	38.2
Sadness	100
Interest	91.1
Contempt	76.4
Bewilderment	50
Determination	85.2
% Misreading	
Contempt as Disgust	23.5
Disgust as Contempt	61.7
Bewilderment as Sadness	29.4

Table 1: DOFA Test (Japanese Facial Expressions Tested On 34 Chinese Students)

In terms of the above results, the Japanese facial expressions except for "disgust" and "bewilderment" are easy for Chinese to recognize. Note that Chinese college informants can understand "happiness" and "sadness" perfectly. In addition, it should be noted that over sixty percent of the subjects misinterpreted "disgust" as "contempt."

% Correct	
*I'm confused	38.2
Bribery	2.9
**Take a seat/Have a meal	32.3
Arrested	17.6
***Insult	20.5
****I give up	50
*****Let me pass	0
Am I cute?	14.7
Flattering	0
Promise	11.7
Ghost	11.7
Welcome (to customers)	0
I remembered!	76.4
I'm relieved!	88.2
A charm for not being frightened	2.9
% Misreading	
*Interpreted as "consideration"	26.4
**Interpreted as "please"	35.2
***Interpreted as "making a ghost's face"	41.1
****Interpreted as "I cannot but..."	38.2
*****Interpreted as "shaking hands"	23.5

Table 2: DOGA Test (Japanese Emblems Tested on 34 Chinese Students)

The results show that the Japanese emblems which are highly culturally bound such as "bribery," "Let me pass," "Am I cute?" "flattering," "promise," "ghost," "welcome to customers," and "a charm for not being frightened" were very

difficult for Chinese college students to understand. Chinese university students, however, had better understanding in reading the Japanese emblems like "I remembered!" and "I'm relieved!". Moreover, the misinterpreted parts suggest that Chinese students tend to associate the emblems in their culture with the same ones in Japanese culture.

The results of DOFA Test and DOGA Test in Hoffer Nonverbal Communication Tape are shown in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively. Again, the table indicates not only the percentage of correctness but also the percentage of some of the obvious misreading and misinterpretations.

Hoffer NVC Results	
% Correct	
Happiness	79.4
Anger	82.3
Surprise	97.1
Fear	88.2
Disgust	17.6
Sadness	88.2
Interest	79.4
Contempt	44.1
Bewilderment	82.3
Determination	85.2
% Misreading	
Contempt as Disgust	47.1
Disgust as Contempt	76.4
Happiness as Determination	17.6

Table 3: DOFA Test (American Facial Expressions Tested on 34 Chinese Students)

Generally speaking, Chinese students had good understanding of American facial expressions, such as "surprise," (over 90 percent) "anger," "bewilderment," and "determination" (Each of them is over 80 percent). However, they had some difficulty in reading American facial expressions like "disgust" and "contempt." Besides, it is tough for Chinese students to distinguish the difference between "disgust" and "contempt."

Hoffer NVC Results	
% Correct	
Money	67.6
*Proud/snobbish	23.5
Crazy, foolish	67.6
No, no (Don't do that)	100
37	23.5
Good luck	0
Over my head/ It's too hard	0
Maybe so, maybe not	17.6
**Stop	14.7
Sit down/slow down	47.6
Hurry up	41.1
Come here (to adults)	82.3
Come here (to children)	52.9
***You got it/correct	14.7
I/me	55.8
% Misreading	
*Interpreted as "Stink "	23.5
** Interpreted as "Absolutely not "	55.8
*** Interpreted as "It's you"	88.2

Table 4: DOGA Test (American Emblems Tested on 34 Chinese Students)

American emblems such as "money," "crazy/foolish," "No, no (Don't do that)" and "Come here (to adults)" were better understood by Chinese students. Note that the emblem "No, no (Don't do that)" was perfectly understood. The emblems like "proud/snobbish," "37," "good luck," "over my head / It's too hard," "maybe so, maybe not," "stop," and "You got it/ correct" were very difficult for Chinese to recognize. It should also be noted that over 80 percent of students interpreted "You got it/correct" as "It's you."

Based on Akiyama and Hoffer NVC Results, the five Japanese facial expressions chosen for DOFA Post-test are "anger," "disgust," "contempt," "bewilderment," and "determination"; the five American facial expressions chosen for DOFA Post-test include "happiness," "disgust," "interest," "contempt," and "bewilderment". Also, since over 75 percent of informants showed good understanding in emblems such as "I remembered!" and "I'm relieved!", they both are excluded in Japanese DOGA Post-test. In the same way, 13 emblems were selected for American DOGA Post-test.

You may wonder at this point why we included the more difficult facial expressions and emblems in DOGA Post-test. The reason is simple. This way of selection will make it easier for us to detect and compare student's learnability of facial expressions and emblems between DOFA Test and DOFA Post-test, and between DOGA Test and DOGA Post-test. As for learnability of Japanese and American facial expressions and emblems, the results of DOFA Post-test and DOGA Post-test are shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

% Correct	
Anger	83.8
Disgust	87.1
Contempt	93.5
Bewilderment	22.5
Determination	61.5
Japanese DOGA Post-test (a week later)	
% Correct	
Bribery	77.4
Arrested	70.9
I'm confused.	25.8
Take a seat/Have a meal	77.4
Insult	58.1
I give up.	90.3
Am I cute?	61.2
Let me pass.	35.4
Flattering	32.2
Ghost	83.8
Promise	48.3
Welcome (to customers)	12.9
A charm for not being frightened	12.9

Table 5: Japanese DOFA Post-Test (A Week Later)

The results of Japanese DOFA Post-test show that Chinese informants have learned facial expressions like "disgust" and "contempt" but not "anger," "bewilderment," and "determination." Note that the percentage of understanding decreased drastically for "bewilderment".

The results of Japanese DOGA Post-test reveal that Chinese informants had better understanding in all emblems except "I'm confused", compared to Japanese DOGA Test a week ago. Some of the emblems such as "bribery," "arrested," "Take a seat/Have a meal," "I give up" and "ghost" were learned by the subjects. However, the percentage of understanding other emblems like "Let me pass," "flattering," "promise" "Welcome (to customers)" and "a charm for not being frightened" are still low. The results do not seem to suggest that all emblems were learned and maintained by the Chinese informants.

% Correct	
Happiness	80.6
Disgust	61.2
Interest	83.8
Contempt	51.6
Bewilderment	74.1
American DOGA Post-test	
% Correct	
Over my head/ It's too hard	64.5
*Proud/snobbish	48.3
"I" or "Me"	96.7
Stop! (a strong gesture)	64.5
You got it/correct	41.9
Good luck!	29
Crazy, foolish	67.7
Maybe so, maybe not	25.8
37	41.9
Come here (to children)	83.8
Sit down/slow down	87.1
Money	83.8
Hurry up!	67.7

Table 6: American DOFA Post-Test (A Week Later)

Compared with American DOFA test conducted a week ago, American DOFA Post-test suggests that facial expressions such as "happiness," "disgust," "interest," were learned and maintained by Chinese informants. Also, the facial

expression "contempt" was better recognized in DOFA Post-test. However, the percentage of understanding "bewilderment" decreased in DOFA Post-test.

American DOGA Post-test yielded the results which indicate that Chinese subjects had better understanding in all emblems, compared with American DOGA test a week ago. This, however, does not seem to suggest that all emblems were learned and maintained by Chinese informants. It is due to the fact that the percentage of reading emblems such as "proud/snobbish" "You got it/correct," "good luck," "maybe so, maybe not" and "37" were still low.

4. Conclusion

In terms of understandability of facial expressions by Chinese college students, we can summarize the points as follows:

As for Japanese facial expressions, Chinese college students could understand them very well except for "disgust" and "bewilderment".

Chinese students had a hard time understanding American facial expressions such as "disgust" and "contempt"; The rest, however, was easy for Chinese to recognize.

It is interesting to see that Chinese tend to misinterpret "disgust" as "contempt" in both Japanese DOFA test and American DOFA test.

Generally speaking, Chinese informants could better understand Japanese facial expressions than American facial expressions.

Speaking of understandability of emblems, Chinese had a very difficult time interpreting most of the Japanese emblems except for "I remembered!" and "I'm relieved!". This is because most of these emblems are highly culturally-bound for Chinese. Compared to Japanese emblems studied here, the American emblems are less culturally specific for Chinese, as we can easily see from Table 2 and Table 4. Our study reported here supports Hoffer and Akiyama's hypothesis that emblems which are highly culturally-bound are incomprehensible to non-natives. This can be seen and verified from Japanese emblems like "Let me pass," "flattering" and "Welcome (to customers)" and from American emblems such as "good luck" and "over my head/It's too hard.". We also noticed that when students try to interpret an emblem of another culture, they tend to associate the meaning of the emblem of another culture with the same or similar emblem of their culture. This makes it easier for students to understand an emblem in another culture if it means the same as an emblem from their culture. The American emblem meaning "no, no or Don't do that" is the best example to explain the positive emblem transfer from one culture to another culture. Also, this may make students misinterpret the emblem in another culture if it happens to mean something completely different from their culture. The American emblem which means "You got it/correct" is the best example in negative emblem transfer from one culture to another culture.

With reference to learnability, the results of both Japanese and American DOFA Post-test and DOGA Post-test when compared to Japanese and American DOFA test and DOGA test, do not conform with Hoffer and Akiyama's hypothesis that if facial expressions and emblems are to be learned by non-natives, the latter will be better memorized and maintained than the former by non-natives. In other words, our results did not support Hoffer and Akiyama's hypothesis that emblems will be learned in less time than that of the facial expressions.

This is due to the following facts. First, Japanese and American DOGA Post-tests indicate that the percentage of understanding some of the Japanese and American emblems by non-natives was quite low (less than sixty percent). Second, most of the Japanese and American facial expressions in DOFA Post-tests were well recognized by Chinese informants compared to the previous test. If we compare Table 5-6 with Table 1-4 carefully, we are in no position to claim that emblems will be learned in less time than that of the facial expressions.

5. References

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Appendix

Japanese Emblems

I'm confused...put the tip of one's index finger to one's chin. (feminine)

Bribery....move one's hand horizontally under one's sleeve.

Take a seat/Have a meal....thrust one's arm with palm up and move it up and down several times slightly.

Arrested....thrust one's arms as if bound at the wrists.

Insult....pull down one's lower eyelid with one's index finger.

I give up....throw up one's hands.

Let me pass (interrupt)....move one's hand up and down several times with palm sideways.

Am I cute?....put one's index fingers on cheeks and lean one's head slightly with a smile. (childish)

Flattering....revolve the fist on one's palm as if grinding sesame seeds.

Promise....heek one's little fingers.

Ghost....hand down one's hands in front of one's chest.

Welcome (to customers)...rub one's palm with one's fist.

I remembered!....pat one's palm with one's fist.

I'm relieved!....pat one's hands on one's chest and sigh.

A charm for not being frightened by a large audience....write the Chinese character (人) meaning "man" on one's palm and pretend to swallow it.

American Emblems

Money....rubbing one's thumb, index finger and middle finger together.

Proud, snobbish....put one's index finger horizontally under one's nose and pull it up slightly.

Crazy, foolish....revolve one's index finger beside one's ear.

No, no (Don't do that).... Shake one's index finger in front.

31....blink one's fist three times and then show one's palm, thumb, and index finger.

Good luck!....make a cross with one's index finger and middle finger.

Over my head/It's too hard!....waving one's hand several times over one's head.

Maybe so, maybe not....wave one's hand on horizontal level several times slowly with one's head slightly leaned.

Stop! (a strong gesture)....shake off one's arms downward in cross way.

Sit down/Slow down....move one's arms downward from over one's head slowly.

Hurry up!revolve one's index finger in front.

Come here (to adults)....wave one's fingers with palm up.

Come here (to children)....move one's arm toward oneself several times slowly like raking up fallen leaves.

You got it/Correct!....point to the opposite with one's index finger.

"I" or "Me"point one's chest with one's thumb.