

# Cultural Communication Styles

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss some of the differences in communication styles that are culturally derived. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Symbols and Misunderstandings
  - a. In Non-verbal Communication
  - b. In Verbal Communication
2. Communication Styles in Conflict

## 1. Symbols and Misunderstandings

When we speak to another person, we use words, both spoken and written, and a variety of non-verbal means of communication.

Different cultures have different meanings for both verbal and non-verbal symbols. **Asymbol** is just a representation of a concept in a tangible form.

### IN CONTEXT

A symbol could be a gesture, or simply a letter of the alphabet. Or if you're texting, you might use some sort of shorthand, such as "u" instead of the word "you" or "LOL" for "laughing out loud."

People in the group with whom you are using this shorthand have to understand that "LOL" stands for "laughing out loud", as texting involves its own symbols that people who are accustomed to using them understand. If you're not used to using them—even though you speak English and use texting—you may not be able to decipher a particular message.

We all use symbols differently, and there are different meanings for particular symbols in different cultures. Naturally, this can sometimes cause misunderstandings.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Symbol

A representation of a concept in a tangible form.

## 1a. In Non-verbal Communication

Misunderstandings can often be present with **non-verbal communication**, which relies on non-word symbols, such as gestures, tone of voice, and eye contact.

A very common gesture can have several different meanings depending on the culture in which it is used.

🔄 **EXAMPLE** The symbol formed by making a circle with the index finger and thumb means “OK” in the United States and Britain. However, in Japan, it means money; in Russia, it means zero. In Brazil, it’s actually an insult.

This can also be true of other non-verbal communication methods.

### IN CONTEXT

In the United States, there is a certain distance that we feel comfortable standing from people. If someone starts to move into what we call our personal space, we move back and get uncomfortable. In other cultures, standing more closely together is considered natural and normal.

You could be talking to someone from a culture in which standing close, even if the person doesn’t know you, is considered the norm. Because this is not the norm for you, you might find yourself moving across the room to try to get more distance. Things like this can cause a misunderstanding.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Non-Verbal Communication

Communication using a variety of physical codes.

## 1b. In Verbal Communication

Even **verbal communication**, which involves the spoken or written word, can cause misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can sometimes be based simply on tone of voice.

🔄 **EXAMPLE** In some cultures, speaking in a more animated way indicates interest, whereas in other cultures, people might want to speak in a more contained manner, particularly in a professional setting.

Even the use of a particular word can be taken the wrong way when engaging in verbal communication.

### IN CONTEXT

In the United States, it's quite common to refer to ourselves as American. However, if you use that term in Canada or South America, it's a bit insulting. It sounds ethnocentric because people from those countries are also Americans. Thus, it’s preferable to call yourself a North American or someone from the United States in order to specify the particular country.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Verbal Communication

Communication using the code commonly called spoken or written language.

## 2. Communication Styles in Conflict

Becoming more aware of these differences can be very helpful in terms of preventing conflicts, especially conflicts that can escalate because people are unaware that what they're doing has conveyed an unintended message.

Things like words, gestures, and spatial distance are all examples of misunderstandings that can happen because the meaning of a particular verbal or non-verbal symbol is interpreted differently in different cultures.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Even something as simple as a handshake, which in the United States is considered very friendly for someone you've just met, can cause a misunderstanding. In some cultures, a handshake is totally inappropriate; you would bow instead.



### BIG IDEA

Misunderstandings can impede communication because you could be sending messages that you never intended. Symbols, both verbal and non-verbal, can be problematic in intercultural communication unless there is an awareness and understanding of the symbols' meanings for a particular culture.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that communication styles often differ across cultures. In particular, the **symbols we use in non-verbal and verbal communication have the potential to cause misunderstandings** if we are interacting with someone for whom the meanings of those particular words or gestures are different. You now understand that because of the opportunity for **conflict to result from differences in communication styles**, it's important to have an awareness and understanding of these differences. This awareness can be extremely helpful in both preventing and resolving conflicts. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



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#### Symbol

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#### Verbal Communication

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