

INTERPRETING SILENCE, GESTURE AND GAZE: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN HAUSA-IGBO INTERETHNIC INTERACTION

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication is central to the construction and interpretation of meaning, but the meanings attached to nonverbal behaviour are shaped by culturally learned expectations. This study examines the forms, meanings and communicative functions of selected nonverbal behaviours in Hausa-Igbo interethnic interaction, with particular attention to gestures, facial expression, eye contact, interpersonal distance, touch, silence, posture and vocal characteristics. A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted. Data were obtained from 45 Hausa and Igbo undergraduate students in selected universities in southeastern Nigeria through a structured questionnaire and participant observation. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and chi-square tests, while qualitative observations and open-ended responses were analysed thematically. The findings indicate a high level of awareness of nonverbal communication ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.70$) and statistically significant differences between the two groups in the interpretation of silence, touch, eye contact and interpersonal distance. Participants also considered nonverbal communication influential in business, educational and social contexts, with social interaction receiving the highest rating ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.55$). Learning culturally appropriate greetings was rated the most useful strategy for improving intercultural communication ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.51$). The study argues that intercultural misunderstanding may arise even where interlocutors possess adequate verbal competence because familiar nonverbal behaviours can carry different culturally grounded meanings. The findings have implications for intercultural orientation and communication training in culturally diverse university and professional settings.

Keywords: nonverbal communication; intercultural communication; Hausa; Igbo; kinesics; proxemics

1. Introduction

Communication extends beyond words. In face-to-face interaction, gestures, facial expressions, posture, gaze, silence, touch, interpersonal distance and vocal qualities work alongside spoken language to establish relationships, regulate interaction, express attitudes and emotions, and construct meaning (Knapp et al., 2014; Burgoon et al., 2021). These resources are not merely supplementary to speech; in many interactions they provide information that speakers and hearers use in interpreting what is said and what is left unsaid.

The interpretation of nonverbal behaviour is, however, culturally situated. Social groups develop expectations concerning respect, hierarchy, intimacy, emotional display, bodily orientation and appropriate interpersonal distance (Hall, 1966; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2019).

Consequently, a behaviour that is understood as a sign of confidence or friendliness in one cultural setting may be interpreted as disrespect, excessive familiarity or indifference in another. The possibility of divergent interpretation is particularly important in multilingual and multicultural societies such as Nigeria, where speakers from different ethnolinguistic communities interact routinely.

Hausa and Igbo provide a useful context for examining this issue. Descriptions in the literature associate Hausa interactional practices with restraint, modesty, respect for hierarchy and sensitivity to social status, particularly in interactions involving elders and authority figures (Last, 2008; Paden, 1973). Descriptions of Igbo social interaction, by contrast, emphasise participation, expressiveness and active conversational involvement (Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Uchendu, 1965). Such descriptions should not be treated as fixed properties of individuals. Rather, they provide culturally informed expectations that may influence how participants interpret particular behaviours.

University campuses offer an especially useful setting for examining these differences because students from different parts of Nigeria meet frequently in classrooms, residences, student organisations and informal social spaces. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether Hausa and Igbo speakers employ similar nonverbal resources, but whether they attach similar meanings to those resources in interethnic encounters.

Although Nigerian scholarship has examined multilingualism, language attitudes, code-switching and verbal pragmatic practices extensively, comparatively less empirical attention has been given to nonverbal behaviour across major Nigerian ethnolinguistic groups. This study addresses that gap by examining Hausa and Igbo students' awareness and interpretation of selected nonverbal behaviours and by considering the contexts in which participants perceive such behaviours to be particularly influential.

The study is guided by three questions: (1) What is the level of awareness of nonverbal communication among Hausa and Igbo students? (2) Do Hausa and Igbo students differ significantly in their interpretation of selected nonverbal behaviours? and (3) In which social contexts do participants perceive nonverbal communication as most influential? The study also examines the strategies participants consider useful for reducing culturally based misunderstanding.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Nonverbal Communication as a Cultural and Multimodal Resource

Nonverbal communication may be understood as an organised set of bodily, spatial and vocal resources through which social meaning is produced and interpreted. Birdwhistell's (1970) kinesics framework draws attention to body movement as culturally patterned behaviour, while Hall's (1966) proxemics explains how interpersonal space is socially organised. More recent multimodal scholarship emphasises that gesture, gaze, posture, facial expression, speech and spatial behaviour frequently operate together and should be interpreted as interconnected resources (Jewitt et al., 2021; Norris, 2022).

Culture is central to this process because people acquire expectations about how communicative behaviours should be produced and interpreted. Hall (1976) argues that culturally shared assumptions shape social perception, while research on emotion shows that, even where expressions may be broadly recognisable, cultural display rules influence when, where and how emotional states are made visible (Ekman, 1972; Matsumoto et al., 2016; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2019). Thus, the same observable behaviour may acquire different interactional meanings in different communities.

Intercultural communication becomes problematic when participants interpret unfamiliar behaviour exclusively through the norms of their own community. Gudykunst's (2004) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory is useful in explaining how unfamiliarity and culturally based expectations may create uncertainty in interaction. Intercultural competence consequently involves cultural awareness, behavioural flexibility and the ability to suspend premature judgements (Deardorff, 2020; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

2.2 Kinesics, Oculistics, Proxemics, Haptics, Silence and Paralanguage

Kinesics covers gestures, facial expressions, head movements, posture and bodily orientation. These resources may regulate turns, reinforce verbal messages, express emotion and index interpersonal attitudes (Birdwhistell, 1970). Oculistics, which concerns eye behaviour, is closely related to kinesics because gaze can signal attention, confidence, deference, intimacy or challenge depending on the relationship and context.

Proxemics concerns the use and interpretation of interpersonal space (Hall, 1966). The distance maintained between interlocutors can communicate familiarity, intimacy, authority, respect or social boundaries. Haptics, or communicative touch, is similarly context-sensitive. Its acceptability may vary according to age, gender, social relationship, religious expectations and cultural norms (Burgoon et al., 2021).

Silence is another communicative resource rather than an absence of communication. Depending on context, it can signal reflection, respect, disagreement, embarrassment, uncertainty, emotional restraint or disengagement (Jaworski, 1993; Odebunmi, 2017). Paralanguage, including vocal qualities that accompany speech, can also contribute to meaning by signalling affect, emphasis and interpersonal stance (Trager, 1958). Treating these dimensions together provides a fuller account of nonverbal communication than focusing on gesture alone.

Within the cultural descriptions reviewed for this study, Hausa communicative traditions are associated with modesty, restraint and sensitivity to hierarchy, especially in encounters involving elders or persons in positions of authority (Last, 2008; Paden, 1973). Igbo communicative traditions are described as more participatory and expressive, with active conversational involvement and comparatively dynamic bodily expression (Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Uchendu, 1965). These descriptions are analytical tendencies rather than universal rules. Individual behaviour is also shaped by age, gender, social relationship, setting, education and previous intercultural experience.

2.3 Hausa–Igbo Interethnic Communication and the Research Gap

Research on Nigerian communication has established the importance of language, social identity and cultural norms in interaction, but empirical comparative work on nonverbal communication between Hausa and Igbo speakers remains limited. The existing literature provides useful conceptual accounts of kinesics, proxemics, silence, intercultural competence and culturally patterned behaviour, but there is a need for studies that place these dimensions within a shared contemporary interactional environment.

The present study responds to this gap by bringing together questionnaire evidence and observation. The questionnaire identifies patterns in participants' reported awareness and interpretation, while observation and open-ended responses provide contextual information about how particular behaviours are understood. Hall's Proxemics Theory and Birdwhistell's Kinesics Theory provide the principal analytical framework, with Ekman's work on facial expression and Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory providing complementary perspectives. Together, these approaches allow the study to examine bodily movement, gaze, distance, touch, silence and related cues as culturally situated resources.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative evidence were collected and brought together at the interpretation stage (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study was conducted in selected universities in southeastern Nigeria, where Hausa and Igbo students interact in academic and social settings.

The target population comprised Hausa and Igbo undergraduate students with direct experience of interethnic interaction. Forty-five participants were purposively selected: 30 Hausa students and 15 Igbo students. The unequal group sizes constitute a methodological limitation of the supplied dataset and should be addressed with a balanced sample in any subsequent data collection or replication. The present manuscript does not alter the reported participant numbers or invent replacement observations, because doing so would compromise the integrity of the study.

3.2 Instruments and Data Collection

Two instruments were used: a structured questionnaire and an observation schedule. The questionnaire contained demographic items and Likert-scale statements addressing gestures, facial expression, eye contact, interpersonal distance, touch, silence, posture and vocal characteristics. The observation schedule covered greeting practices, eye contact, interpersonal distance, body orientation, gestures, facial expression, silence and turn-taking. The instruments therefore addressed the principal nonverbal variables examined in the study rather than restricting the analysis to gesture and gaze.

Content validity was established through expert review by specialists in linguistics, pragmatics and communication studies. A pilot test yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency (Taber, 2018). Participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Questionnaires were administered directly, while observations were conducted during naturally occurring interactions with minimal researcher interference.

3.3 Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Chi-square tests were used to examine differences between the Hausa and Igbo groups on the reported categorical interpretations of selected behaviours. Qualitative material from observations and open-ended responses was analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to provide triangulation. No regression analysis was conducted in the supplied study; accordingly, no regression results are reported.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Hausa (n=30)	Igbo (n=15)	Total	%
Male	13	5	18	40.0
Female	17	10	27	60.0
Total	30	15	45	100.0

The sample comprised 30 Hausa participants (66.7%) and 15 Igbo participants (33.3%). Females constituted 60.0% of the sample and males 40.0%. All participants were undergraduates with experience of intercultural interaction in university settings. The unequal Hausa-Igbo

distribution should be borne in mind when interpreting the group comparison and limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised.

4.2 Awareness of Nonverbal Communication

Statement	Mean	SD	Decision
Nonverbal communication influences everyday interaction	4.53	0.61	Agree
Gestures improve communication	4.40	0.72	Agree
Facial expressions affect interpretation	4.48	0.67	Agree
Eye contact communicates meaning	4.33	0.79	Agree
Overall	4.44	0.70	Agree

The overall mean of 4.44 (SD = 0.70) indicates a high level of awareness of nonverbal communication. Participants agreed that nonverbal behaviour influences everyday interaction and that gestures, facial expressions and eye contact contribute to meaning. This pattern supports the view that verbal and nonverbal resources operate together in the construction of meaning (Knapp et al., 2014; Burgoon et al., 2021).

4.3 Cultural Differences in the Interpretation of Nonverbal Behaviour

Behaviour	Hausa (%)	Igbo (%)	χ^2	p
Silence indicates respect	57	48	4.12	.042*
Friendly touch acceptable	35	60	5.87	.018*
Eye contact signifies confidence	40	71	6.32	.011*
Close interpersonal distance acceptable	38	67	5.44	.020*

*Significant at $p < .05$.

The chi-square results indicate statistically significant differences between the two groups for each of the four behaviours reported in Table 3. The largest descriptive contrast concerns eye contact: 71% of Igbo respondents associated eye contact with confidence compared with 40% of Hausa respondents. Friendly touch was regarded as acceptable by 60% of Igbo respondents and 35% of Hausa respondents, while close interpersonal distance was accepted by 67% of Igbo respondents compared with 38% of Hausa respondents. For silence, 57% of Hausa respondents associated it with respect compared with 48% of Igbo respondents.

The qualitative responses help to contextualise these differences. Some Hausa participants associated direct gaze towards elders with disrespect, whereas an Igbo participant described eye contact as evidence of attention and honesty. Hausa participants were also more likely to

associate silence with respect, patience or reflection, while prolonged silence was more readily associated by Igbo participants with uncertainty or disengagement. These interpretations are compatible with the broader cultural tendencies described in the literature, but they should not be treated as fixed characteristics of all Hausa or Igbo speakers.

The results support the study's theoretical position that nonverbal behaviour is culturally organised. A behaviour does not possess a single meaning independent of context; its interpretation is mediated by culturally acquired expectations and the social relationship between participants (Hall, 1976; Gudykunst, 2004). The findings therefore demonstrate how intercultural misunderstanding can occur even where interlocutors possess adequate competence in one another's spoken language.

4.4 Perceived Influence Across Social Contexts

Context	Mean	SD	Decision
Business	4.12	0.76	Agree
Education	4.48	0.58	Agree
Social life	4.61	0.55	Agree
Overall	4.40	0.63	Agree

Participants regarded nonverbal communication as influential across business, educational and social contexts. Social life recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.55$), followed by education ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.58$) and business ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.76$). The overall mean of 4.40 indicates that participants perceive nonverbal behaviour as relevant across both formal and informal interaction. The finding is consistent with a multimodal understanding of communication in which bodily, spatial and vocal resources contribute to meaning in different settings.

4.5 Strategies for Improving Intercultural Communication

Strategy	Mean	SD	Rank
Learning cultural greetings	4.58	0.51	1
Cultural orientation programmes	4.46	0.60	2
Respect for cultural differences	4.39	0.68	3
Increased interaction	4.18	0.72	4
Media awareness	4.02	0.81	5

Learning culturally appropriate greetings received the highest rating ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.51$), followed by cultural orientation programmes ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.60$). Respect for cultural differences, increased interaction and media awareness followed in that order. The pattern suggests a preference for practical forms of cultural learning. Such learning can make unfamiliar communicative conventions more predictable and may reduce the tendency to judge another person's behaviour exclusively according to one's own cultural expectations. This interpretation is consistent with Deardorff's (2020) emphasis on awareness, adaptability and empathy in intercultural competence.

4.6 Discussion of the Findings

Taken together, the findings show that Hausa and Igbo participants recognise many of the same nonverbal resources but do not necessarily assign identical meanings to them. The most prominent differences in the available data concern silence, touch, eye contact and interpersonal

distance. This is important because the physical behaviour itself may be shared while the social interpretation differs. An act intended to communicate attention, respect or friendliness may therefore be received as disrespect, excessive familiarity or disengagement.

The finding on interpersonal distance is particularly relevant to Hall's Proxemics Theory. Differences in the acceptability of close distance suggest that spatial behaviour is not simply a matter of personal preference but may also carry culturally learned meanings. Similarly, the findings on gaze, gesture and related bodily behaviour are compatible with Birdwhistell's Kinesics Theory, which treats body movement as patterned social behaviour rather than random physical activity.

The findings also have implications for Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory. Where participants encounter unfamiliar nonverbal behaviour, uncertainty may increase if they lack knowledge of the other group's communicative conventions. Intercultural competence can reduce this uncertainty by encouraging participants to seek contextual explanations instead of immediately assigning negative meanings to unfamiliar behaviour (Gudykunst, 2004; Deardorff, 2020).

At the same time, the results should not be interpreted as evidence that every Hausa or Igbo speaker behaves in the same way. Nonverbal communication is affected by age, gender, social relationship, setting, religion, education, personality and previous intercultural contact. The study is therefore most useful for identifying areas in which different cultural expectations may create opportunities for misunderstanding, rather than for establishing rigid behavioural rules.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined nonverbal communication in Hausa–Igbo interethnic interaction among university students in southeastern Nigeria. The findings indicate a high level of awareness of nonverbal communication and show that participants regard nonverbal behaviour as influential in social, educational and business contexts. More importantly, statistically significant differences were identified in the interpretation of silence, touch, eye contact and interpersonal distance.

The study concludes that intercultural communication difficulties may arise not only from differences in spoken language but also from differences in the meanings assigned to familiar nonverbal behaviours. Effective intercultural communication therefore requires attention to culturally specific conventions governing greetings, gaze, personal space, touch, silence and related interactional resources.

The findings have practical implications for universities and other institutions that bring together culturally diverse populations. Intercultural orientation programmes can include practical attention to culturally appropriate greetings, eye behaviour, personal space, touch and the interpretation of silence. Students and staff should also be encouraged to engage across cultural boundaries in ways that promote curiosity, respect and flexibility rather than stereotyping. Such measures may help participants recognise alternative communicative conventions and reduce ethnocentric interpretations of unfamiliar behaviour.

6. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The principal limitation of the present study is the unequal distribution of participants across the two groups: 30 Hausa participants and 15 Igbo participants. Because the study's comparative objective requires meaningful representation of both groups, future data collection should use a balanced sample. The present report retains the supplied figures rather than manufacturing additional observations or altering the reported results.

The study is also limited by its focus on undergraduate students in selected universities in southeastern Nigeria. The findings should therefore not be generalised to all Hausa and Igbo

speakers. In addition, nonverbal communication is highly context-dependent, and the instruments could not capture every influence of age, gender, religion, social relationship and situation. Observation may also influence behaviour when participants are aware of being observed.

These limitations can be addressed in future research by recruiting equal numbers of Hausa and Igbo participants, expanding the geographical coverage of the study, and collecting larger datasets across different age groups and interactional settings. Future studies may also employ detailed multimodal analysis of naturally occurring interaction to examine how gaze, gesture, posture, silence, spatial behaviour and speech operate simultaneously. Longitudinal research could further determine whether sustained intercultural contact changes participants' interpretations of nonverbal behaviour over time.

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