

## *Non-Verbal Behaviour*

### **Eye Contact**

To impress someone with your honesty you, as an Anglo-Australian, would probably look directly at the person while speaking. If you think someone is lying, you may even say, "He couldn't look me straight in the eye". But in many cultures, lowered eyes indicate, rather than an admission of guilt, an attitude of respect. Eye contact will also be affected by gender difference. Even in Australia however, it is considered impolite to look at a person for long. This may be why Australians sometimes interpret the Frenchman's tendency to hold a gaze, as being forward.

### **Facial Expression**

Like the gestures of emotion, facial expressions are not universal. We all become so accustomed to them in the social context in which we habitually encounter them that we come to believe that their interpretation is identical in all culture groups. The effect of this misconception has the potential to interfere with our communication.

Smiling, for example, has quite different functions in different cultural contexts; Westerners are so used to equating it with friendliness, good humour, amusement, or benevolence, that they misinterpret its use, so common in Asia, as a way of masking embarrassment, of concealing unease or even distaste at the behaviour of the person one is dealing with. It somehow seems so incongruous to see a warm smile accompanying the recital of a heart-rending story of family tragedy; it does not come through to the Westerner as a device for masking unbearable emotional torment, and is apt to be misinterpreted as heartlessness or as lack of common humanity.

### **Social Distance**

In casual conversation, in Australia, it is appropriate to stand about 2 - 4 feet from the other person. This is the polite and customary distance. A closer distance between casual friends might be considered rude or strange. However, in some places, such as Middle Eastern or Latin American cultures in casual conversation you should stand very close, within a foot; and as you talk you should purposefully breathe in the other person's face. It is a sign of politeness to let an acquaintance feel your breath as you talk. There are no international rules as to how far apart two people should stand or sit while talking.

### **Politeness and Respect**

Persons to whom one should defer and the methods by which deference is indicated are very much culture-bound and so constitute signals that are open to misinterpretation.

Among people from some culture groups:

- \* The young do not stand with their backs turned to older people, or in such a way that they dominate older people who may be seated, or sit when their father is standing.
- \* The bow of deference may be misinterpreted as servility or unctuousness, a kind of "Uriah Heap" mannerism that provokes suspicion, when the exact opposite effect was intended.