

Our body talks

Comparing Thai and Spanish body language

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Abstract— Gestures and body language that people use in their daily communications to express their ideas and emphasize their speeches are related to the culture where they live. This is why in each culture people use different gestures and body language to communicate with others. Some of these gestures are even appropriated depending on the culture where we are immersed, so it is very important to know the meaning of the gestures that we use when we communicate with native people from other cultures. These differences between countries and cultures can originate conflicts if we don't understand the meaning of the gestures that people use and it might cause misunderstanding. Taken this into account, it is thought that people who study a foreign language should know the most common gestures that native people use in their daily life to complete the meaning of the messages they express. Due to that fact, it is important to perform a comparison between Thai and Spanish gestures in order to teach them to Thai students who learn Spanish.

Keywords— intercultural skills, kinesics, Spanish teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

SPANISH is a language that nowadays has a huge importance all over the world. According to the latest studies performed by recognized organizations, Spanish language is the most widely spoken Romance language in the world and it is the official first language spoken in 21 countries: Spain, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Guatemala, Cuba, Bolivia, Honduras, Paraguay, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Equatorial Guinea, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Uruguay and Puerto Rico. Most of these countries are situated in America, but Spain that is situated in Europe and Equatorial Guinea that is located in Africa.

Worldwide, there are more than 400 million native speakers that share the same language and the same writing, although pronunciation varies in every area without make the language unintelligible to people from different regions. That makes the richness of the Spanish language.

Nowadays, the Spanish-speaking population is growing very fast, especially in the United States. Due to the immigration movement, about all coming from Mexico, the number of Spanish native speakers in United State is increasing in such a way that expert think that the United

States will be the first country in terms of native Spanish speakers in 2050.

The current development of countries where Spanish is spoken is making the Spanish language stronger every day and it means an important fact to create business opportunities regarding the Spanish language. It should be taken in consideration that:

-Spanish, the official language in twenty one countries, is the third most widely-spoken language in the world, after English and Chinese (Mandarin).

-More than 400 million native people speak Spanish worldwide.

-Experts predict that by the year 2050, there will be 530 million Spanish speakers, of which 100 million will be living in the United States.

Due to these facts, the demand of workers who can speak Spanish is growing every day even in Asia, where a lot of companies want to make business with other companies in Latin America or Spain. Thailand is not an exception and this is why the most important universities in the country have included Spanish studies in their curriculums.

Taking into consideration the importance of the Spanish language in the world, it is understandable that the number of Spanish learners increase in Asia day by day. For example, the Cervantes Institute in Manila (Philippines) is the most important organization in charge of promoting the Spanish language in Asia and has published that, according to the latest information in 2013; the growing of Spanish learners in India has exceeded all expectations. Headquarters of Cervantes Institute can be found in China, Japan, Singapore or Malaysia.

In Thailand, there are three universities that offer Spanish as a Major in their curriculums: Chulalongkorn University, Ramkahan University and Khon Kaen University. Other universities, such us Chiang Mai University, offer Spanish language as a Minor. Besides, Spanish in taught in many international schools, governments schools and private schools around the country.

When Thai native speakers face to Spanish language, they realize that they do not have to learn only the language, but also the non-verbal expressions that Spanish speakers use when they talk which are important to understand the meaning of the message. As Flora Davis (1998:2) [1] says talking about words "*they are beautiful, fascinating and important, but we have overvalued excessively, due to the*

fact that they do not represent the totality, even half of the message”.

This is an affirmation proved by the studies performed by the anthropologist Albert Mehrabian (1968:53) [2], in which he explains that only 7 per cent of the impact of the message belongs to words. The 38 per cent belongs to the way in which words are said, for example, the voice tone, and the 55 per cent of the impact of the message comes from facial expressions, body language and gestures.

Body language and gestures are considered part of the culture and this is the reason why in every culture we can find body expressions that are different from gestures in other cultures to express the same meaning.

The importance of learning about this part of the native culture has arrived to curriculums in most of the universities where languages are taught. In the case of Spanish language, the University of Alcalá in Madrid has a complete program called *Culture and Civilization* where gestures and body language related to Spanish are taught to foreign students who learn Spanish language.

This research tries to exemplify the differences and similarities between Spanish culture and Thai culture to understand better the importance of learning more about this topic to avoid embarrassing or misunderstanding situations who can originate problems related to communication in daily life.

A. Problems identified

Thailand is a country with an ancient culture. It is the only one country that has never being conquered in the Southeast Asia and it did not suffer the colonization because their kings could keep Thailand independent during the colonization period.

This characteristic makes Thailand a unique country in the Southeast Asia. Its culture and its customs have been preserved for many years this is why Thai people are different from people living in neighbor countries, due to the fact that their culture has being less influenced by ancient western colonizers.

As an example of this, people use in Thailand the *wai* to greet, that means a movement in which head bows and hand are joined. This greeting is very characteristic of this country and it is different from greeting in other close countries like Vietnam or Malaysia.

Kenny Yee & Catherine Gordon (2010:43) [3] explain in their book *Dos & Don'ts in Thailand* more about the Thai *wai*.

“The wai is strikingly similar in form to the Indian Namaste greeting when the palms are clasped in front of the body. Historically, India was one country that had great influence on Thai customs and religion. China was another country that had exerted its cultural influences on Thailand. The Chinese way of greeting, ‘koh kung’ also involves joining two hands in front of the body but the Indian gesture is closest to the Thai wai. Religiously, one of the many poses of the Buddha show him clasping both hands together.”

Taking into consideration this affirmation, we see how religion and close countries influence in culture. Due to the fact that Spain and Thailand are situated very far in our planet and they do not share neighbor countries or religion, it is easily understood that Thailand and Spain do not share neither most of gestures and body language daily used, starting with the greetings.

Due to the ancient culture that people in Thailand preserve, it is interesting to compare to Spanish culture that belongs to another part of the world with different religion and beliefs.

In that point it is important to define the word culture and in this research it will be taking into consideration the definition of culture that Fernando Poyatos (1994: 25-26) [4] made:

“a series of habits shared by the members of a group who live in a geographical place, learned but biologically conditioned, such as media (in which language is the base), social relationships, daily routines, the products of this group and how they are used, personalities’ typical showing, national and individual, and their ideas related to their own existence and other members”.

So that, culture is the union of all emotions and habits of a community, part of it belongs to our cultural background and the other part is acquired by learning. Therefore, it is understandable that people who were born and live in one culture behave in a different way than people who grew up in other different culture.

That is quite evident when members from one community move to another community where culture is different. This is the case when Spanish teachers arrive to Thailand, they very quickly realize that Thai customs are very different from Spanish customs and it is needed some time to be adapted to this new culture where misunderstanding situation can originated some problems during this period of adaptation.

The same occurs to Thai students who learn Spanish and will be in contact in the future with Spanish people at their works or in academic contexts.

This is why this research is important, due to the fact that it will be analyzed the differences between Thai body language and Spanish body language used when people talk or communicate. After this analysis, it will be learned how to deal with foreigners or how to communicate in an accurate way with Spanish people.

Although it is not the aim of this research, it is important to point out that gestures and body language are different in every country where Spanish is spoken, so this research is based only in Spanish culture and could be extended in the future to analyze other countries where Spanish is spoken.

B. Literature revision

Some researches similar to this one have been carried out before and they have been used as a guided to do this one. It should be highlighted that none research has been published before to study the case of comparing body language in Spain and in Thailand, so this is the original importance of this research which focuses on Thai and Spanish culture.

To understand better the problem of misunderstanding

when people use body language to communicate and the big differences than can be found in different cultures, the more relevant researches previously carried out related to this topic will be presented next.

Faïza Rahim, an Algerian teacher who has studied Spanish in Spain, performed a research about the case of Algerian and Spanish greetings that was published in 1998 [5]. She worked on five types of situations: first meeting, acquaintances, close friends, relatives, others relations.

These situations were defined by the well-known researcher Fernando Poyatos in 1994. Rahim based her research observing people in Algiers, the capital city of Algeria and Madrid, the capital city of Spain. She studied how people greeted in different situations and was advised by a Spanish native speaker.

Although Spain and Algeria are two countries located in the Mediterranean Sea, these countries are geographically close and share the Mediterranean culture and customs, these two countries do not share the religion. Spain is a Catholic country and Algeria is an Islamic country and this fact has its influence in people daily behavior.

One example that shows the big difference between Spanish people and Algerian people when they greet is that in Algeria two men who are friends or relatives greet with two or four kisses, while in Spain, two men who are friends do not give any kisses at all to each other, they greet with a hug.

On the contrary, between women, greetings are similar in Algeria and in Spain. Women usually give kisses to each other, in Spain they only give two kisses, however, in Algeria can be given two or four kisses.

In the case of a woman and a man, the polite way to greet is to shake hands, but only if they are close friends or relatives and they do not touch each other a lot, while in Spain a woman and a man usually give two kisses even if it is the first time they meet.

Marriage people never kiss their mouth in public in Algeria, while in Spain is a common practice not only between married people, every couple do it anywhere.

Rahim showed in her research that greetings are not the same in every culture, and they are very different in Spain and Algeria although they are two countries very near located. Habits and customs are marked by religion and culture, among other considerations apart from geographical location.

Another interesting comparative study between gestures used in Brazil and Spain was carried out by Nilma Nascimento in 2012 [6]. This research focused on gestures and body language frequently used in Brazil and in Spain. This research includes 134 gestures that are used by people to communicate. Some of them are the same in Spain and in Brazil, but others are substantially different.

By means of pictures, Nilma Nascimento explains the differences between Brazilian gestures and Spanish gestures and she classified the gestures in three big groups: gestures with communicative usage, gestures with social usage, gestures to control and organize the speech.

At the end of her study, Nascimento clarified which gestures are different in both cultures and paid attention to them to be taught in Spanish lesson to help to Brazilian students to communicate better when they speak in Spanish.

The Nascimento's work has been very important to carry out the research that in this document is presented, because this comparison has been taken into consideration to compare Thai gestures and Spanish gestures, although the classification in this research is completely different to the Nascimento's classification. Besides, not all gestures presented by Nascimento have been included in this research, due to the fact that this research is based on daily common situations that can be experimented every day.

Nascimento's work could be used as a very extensive register of gestures to be studied in different cultures.

C.Objectives

Due to the fact that none studies have been carried out to compare body language and gesture in Thailand and Spain, it is considered important to analyze the differences and similarities between gestures frequently used in these two cultures.

To enclose this research and make a good choice of elements to be studied, the four systems of non-verbal communication explained by Ana María Cestero (1998: 10-11) [7] have been taken into account. These four systems are:

- Paralinguistic: related to voice quality, pauses, silences
- Kinesics: related to movements and body postures.
- Proxemics: related to the use of space.
- Chronemics: related to the use of time.

These four systems act in order to add information, reinforce or weaken the content of the message, contradict or camouflage the meaning of the message. Every time we talk the paralinguistic system and the kinesics system act.

This research will focus on the kinesics systems which comprise all elements relative to movements, body language and gestures. However, the other three systems can be studied as well in a deep investigation to extend that one presented in this document.

Taking in consideration the kinesics system, it has been decided to enclose this research to gestures following the explanation that Nilma Nascimento gives (2012:50) in her study "gestures are the sign most studied in the kinesics system, maybe because hands and face are the two parts of the body with more non-verbal information give".

Thus, although this research makes reference in general to body language, it is necessary to specify that gestures are the part of body language that will be mainly studied in this research.

The objectives that are pursued in this research are:

- To study similarities in most common gestures and body language used in Thailand and in Spain in daily life.
- To study differences in most common gestures and body language used in Thailand in daily life.
- To compare how Spanish people and Thai people express same ideas using body language and gestures.

- To understand the different meanings of gestures in Thailand and Spain.
- To design activities addressed to teach Spanish to Thai students to put into practice pragmatics situations in order to student could communicate in a right way with Spanish native speakers.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research combines two approaches, structured and unstructured, due to the fact that a quantitative studied has been done to know how many daily gestures are similar or different in Thailand and in Spain. Besides, a qualitative study has been performed while observing people behavior in these two countries to explain every gesture considered important in this study.

Following the method of observation, there were defined and classified some different expression that people usually use in their daily life to communicate with others. Sometimes people use only the gesture, sometimes they accompany their gestures with words, but all gestures have a meaning that it is understood by people from the same culture.

Studying gestures and body language in Thailand and in Spain is a complicated task because the number of gestures used daily in uncountable. People, above all in Spain, are very expressive and they use constantly their hands or other parts or their body to explain or clarify things. In Thailand it is the same, but people use in general softer gestures than Spanish people to explain the same thing.

This research is mainly oriented to work with Thai students who learn Spanish this is why it was considered that classifying gestures in daily contexts will be helpful to create didactical activities for them.

After a pre-selection of gestures, 45 gestures were selected to be studied, because these gestures are frequently used. Obviously, there are much more gestures that can be added to this research, but it was thought that this selection was good enough to profound in the differences and similarities of both cultures and provide students with practical activities to help them when they travel to Spain or they deal with native Spanish people.

Gestures selected were classified in 5 contexts that follow and extend the contexts defined by M^a Vega de la Fuente (1996) [8] in her research about comparing situational factors in Hungary and Spain. These contexts are: in the restaurant (informal context), on the street, in the classroom, at work (formal context), in a shop.

Finally, it was decided to add some other important gestures that cannot be classified in one of the context above. So, these gestures have been classified by the name of "declassified gestures". These remarkable gestures are described because can be used in different contexts and they need a special classification.

These five contexts named above were selected to pay attention to the students' needs after interview fifty Thai students who learn Spanish. The most common situations that they will live are: working with Spanish people in companies established in Thailand, studying with Spanish teachers in

Thailand and in Spain, being involved in informal situation for example in a restaurant or in the classroom with Spanish friends.

III. RESULTS

Once the gestures were selected for every context, it was important to determine which gestures were different or similar in Thailand and in Spain to express the same thing. It was found that there are expressions which are expressed using gestures in a complete different way in Spain and in Thailand. Some others expression are expressed in the same way in both countries and there are some important cases that should be explained in detail due to the fact that the same gesture has a different meaning in Spain and in Thailand.

Students who were involved in this research could learn more about gestures in Spain and began to understand how important it is to use body language with accuracy.

Some examples will be shown below to introduce the results obtained.

In the context of restaurants, the gesture to order more food in Spain should be carefully taken into account because it is the same gesture that is used in Thailand to ask for the bill, which is when index finger points at the table in a circular movement. It would represent an example about the same gesture having different meanings in the two cultures object of study. In this context, it can be found another difference between Thailand and Spain related to cheering. In Spain it means bad luck when people cheer with a glass or water. However, that belief has no meaning in Thailand.

To exemplify how one culture can interfere and influence in other culture in the context of the street, it should be pointed out that traditionally, in Thailand it is not common seeing couples kissing on public places or walking with hold hands. That behavior is very common in Spain and in other countries like, for instance, United States. Due to the influence of cinema and the arriving of foreign people who come to Thailand to live, it is becoming more and more common to see couples in Thailand walking on the street holding their hands, above all in big cities like Bangkok. On the contrary, this behavior is less followed in more traditional cities or places where there are not so many tourists, like Khon Kaen. Regarding kissing each other on the street, it is thought to be bad behavior in Thailand or not very well accepted. However, in Spain, it is very common to see couples doing it on the street while they are walking.

Besides, due to the western influence, nowadays in Thailand it is popular among young people to use other way to greet waving their hands and saying "Hi!". This is a fashionable greet among the youth who, lately, prefer it instead of the traditional Thai *wai*.

Regarding the Thai *wai* as a traditional greetings, it is important to say that the kind of "*wai*" performed depends on, for example, the status of each person. In Thailand, it is considered a polite behavior to show respect to monks, parents, elder people and teachers or other professionals. This respect is shown when the head is bowed. Due to that fact, the student should show respect to the teacher, in academic

contexts, bowing her head, and the teachers should express their gratitude doing the *wai* without bowing the head. However, in Spain it is not necessary this sign of respect, so teachers and students greet as regular friends although they are not.

Although there are different gestures to express same ideas in Thailand and in Spain, there are some other gestures that are slightly similar in both countries because they imitate the action that the verb expresses.

After studying 44 gestures used on a daily basis by Thai and Spanish people, this research shows that Thai and Spanish people have very different ways to communicate with their bodies and this is the first thing that a foreigner notices when arriving to Thailand. Only 36 per cent of gestures selected to carry out this research are share in both cultures, so there is a total of 64 per cent of gestures that are performed in a different way in Thailand and in Spain to express the same. Besides, it has been found one gesture that is performed in Thailand and in Spain but with a different meaning in both cultures.

IV. CONCLUSION

The most shocking difference between Spanish speakers and Thai speakers is that Spanish use their body much more than Thai do to communicate with others, above all women, and most of gestures are performed softer in Thailand than in Spain. Thai women usually avoid moving too much, while in Spain it is very common to move hands and some parts of their face all the time when somebody speaks.

Gestures and body language are different in every culture due to the fact that they are influenced, among other things, by history, religion or geographical location. Taking into account that Thailand and Spain have few things in common because these two countries do not share a history background, or religion or geographical location, it is not surprising that most of gestures used in Spain and Thailand by native speakers are different.

To avoid misunderstanding in daily life situations, people should pay attention to gestures used in the country where they live, and it is important to learn the body language in order to succeed when we want to communicate our thoughts, ideas or needs to other people. We do not have to learn only words to communicate with other people who speak a different language, we also have to learn gestures and body language, as well as behavior rules that can be different to our hometown. This is the only way to a better understanding between people and to be respectful with other cultures.

As it has been explained in this research, body language represents a big part of the meaning of a message, so it is necessary to learn some important characteristics of a culture to communicate with accuracy. This is more important for students who have the intention of working in companies from other countries or students who want to continue their studies abroad.

Regarding the case of Thailand and Spain, students who want to go to Spain to study or to work have to be aware of the difference between body language employed in Spain and

they should not feel upset, for example, if people do not appreciate the traditional Thai greet, the *wai*. All of us should respect other cultures and understand their differences. Sometimes the differences are very small and we can deal easily with that, but in other occasions, as it was explained before, we can find gestures that mean opposite things in two cultures.

This research has a didactical intention too. It was thought that this research could help to improve intercultural skills of Thai students who learn Spanish. This is why two didactical units have been designed to work in class with students and to make them learn more about body language and gestures used by Spanish native speakers.

Regarding the intercultural difference that we can face in our life, we have to understand that we are born in countries where we have learnt to communicate with words and with our body; this is part of our culture due to the fact that we have been influenced from childhood and our education is based on communications with others. However, we have to be conscious that our culture is not the only culture in the world and in every country things are done in a different way, although we can find some similarities sometimes. People should be intelligent enough to learn from differences and to admire the variety of cultures that we can share in this world. There is no culture better than other, there are only people who share habits, routines and customs due to belonging to the same culture.

All in all, understanding the richness of a culture implies to be respectful with customs, habits and any other characteristic that make people from a community special and unique in the world.

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