

Pragmatic Miscommunication of Common Handy Signs in Iraqi Body Language

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Abstract

Handy signs are very important in body language , so common and mostly used in every day interaction consciously or un consciously. The study is concerned with analyzing some of the Iraqi handy signs that could have different meanings, depending on various contexts. Since, there are different meanings, pragmatic miscommunication is likely to happen when interlocutors communicate through using these signs without the help of uttered words. The research aims at giving a review of the importance of this topic, as well as, describing and analyzing the intended meaning of each sign in each special context. The chosen signs will be pictured by taking photos which represent the eight chosen Iraqi handy signs, that are acted by an Iraqi volunteer. After clarifying and analyzing these signs, the conclusions will be helpful to find out how to communicate clearly by using these handy signs.

Section one

Introduction

1. Introduction and Statement of the problem :

Many signs are used everyday in our Iraqi community without paying attention that they represent a mutual knowledge in our minds when we communicate with each other. These signs may differ in their real intentions from place to place regionally and socially. Armstrong & Wagner (2003:58) clarifies a good example of the famous sign that means mostly the approval and agreement around the world (almost the western one), which can be shown in fig.1.



Fig.(1) Ok sign

The same sign in Arabic world means "I swear to God!", which " is used in a threatening manner most of the time." (Ammar, 2014). This is a simple example shows the difference in meaning between just two regions for one sign, with different societies. For this, one could imagine how much signs may differ in their meanings among the variety of regions and societies over the world. Furthermore, the sign itself may have two or more than one meaning in the same region or society, depending on the socio-cultural and pragmatic mutual knowledge, as well as the context in which the interlocutors communicate in, non-verbally. The research will examine and explain some of the handy signs which are mostly used and so common in every day interaction in Iraqi domain. The interaction will be supposed to be relying on the signs without using the words to help in clarifying them. So, the interlocutors will communicate with each other in a far distance by using the shared signs. Thus , the miscommunication may arise because of the confusion in understanding the real message of the sign.

The research aims at describing and interpreting the most used handy signs in every day Iraqi interaction, to remove the ambiguity which may cope with them, as well as clarifying the real pragmatic meaning of the sign in the supposed context.

The study assumes that every handy sign may have different pragmatic meanings depending on the various used contexts. Also, the miscommunication increases when the speaker or receiver could not use words to help them in conveying the meaning of the sign. Finally, the non-verbal communicators need to develop pragmatic and socio-cultural competences to reveal the right intended meaning of the handy sign.

1.2 The Procedures and Data.

First of all, eight Iraqi handy sign will be chosen as the most common used ones in every day interaction. Then, analyzing and explaining these signs with their full description and special movements are going to be traced with the help of the figures for each sign to give a clear insight of the right meaning. At last, the pragmatic meaning for each sign in each supposed different context will be realized.

Sine the chosen handy signs are so common in Iraqi body language. So the data will be pictured by the camera of the mobile for an Iraqi person acts the eight chosen handy signs.

1.3 Model of the research

The models that will be followed in describing and analyzing signs of the body language and interpreting the expected miscommunication, are that of the authors (Armstrong & Wagner) in their book (Field Guide to Gestures) as well as the model of (Yule, G) in his book (pragmatics) which will be useful in interpreting the misinterpretation.

Section Two

Theoretical Review

2. Pragmatic misunderstanding in non-verbal communication.

Every time pragmatics is mentioned, misunderstanding comes coping with it. Yule (2010:127-128) shows that misunderstanding provokes when the interlocutors could not communicate what they really want to say. Since pragmatics deals with the intended meanings of the speaker's utterances, the communicators need to know more than the literal meanings of words. They have to investigate the context of the interaction as well as knowing the pragmatic and the shared socio-cultural knowledge. As it happens in verbal communication, pragmatic misunderstanding is more likely to emerge in non-verbal communication. The latter is defined as "the process of sending and receiving messages without using words, either spoken or written." (Nordquist , 2017). Since the words are missing in this type of communication, the brains of the interlocutors will shift their skills of interpretation from revealing what the words imply in verbal interaction, to the efficiency of knowing what body language signs intend to say in non-verbal interaction. In the verbal one, the interlocutors could interpret the literal meaning of words simply rather than the pragmatic ones, while in non-verbal interactions the interlocutors may face body signs, they could not interpret them literally or pragmatically, because they simply do not know them (i.e. there is no universal dictionary for signs around the world, to be known by all of us). Every sign may have different meanings from place to place , person to person and time to time. For this reason, the right interpretation of the operated sign is judged by the context of the interaction, and the shared socio-cultural conventions of that sign in that place among communicators. Allan Pease & Barbara Pease (2004:110) mentions the thumbs-up sign which is shown in fig.2 , interpreting three meanings varies with different regions.



Fig (2), Thumbs-up

In Europe, the sign means the number 'One'. In Australia, it has a taboo meaning of insulting someone sexually, While the widespread meaning is 'Ok' , 'good' or 'hitchhike'. The 'hitchhike' means to use the thumbs-up with an extended arm to the road, asking for a ride from the passing vehicles.

Nowadays, this sign is developed to mean 'like' in social media as it is used in 'Facebook' network application. Feather (2016) mentions another use which is known in diving where it is

important among the divers deeply underwater to communicate using signs. That the thumbs-up means to stop diving and return to the surface. Miscommunication may arise among the new divers who could interpret the sign as an approval sign instead.

2.2 Gestures and Sign language

One should make a distinction between these two terms to avoid confusion. Crystal (2008:436) says that the sign language is " the system of manual communication used by certain groups as an alternative to ORAL communication". These groups are used everyday to act these handy signs to interact with others, like : the traffic officers and the drivers, but the main use is an alternative language for the deaf people to enable them of interacting with each other.

Yule (2010: 199) shows that sign language is used instead of oral speaking , while gestures are signs which are mostly used with speech either to add information or to emphasize something, like pointing downwards by your thumb when you are speaking about not doing well in your exam. He (ibid) adds that " the gestures are just part of the way in which meaning is expressed and can be observed while people are speaking and signing. He also defines another term which is 'emblems' that "function like fixed phrases and do not depend on speech" and depend on what the interlocutors have of social competence.

In this research, the distinction is somehow hard to be done for the Iraqi handy signs. The examined signs will be of a nature sometimes showing the rigidity of meaning and in others provide different meanings. So in this study, it will be sufficient to name them as 'handy signs' , since the main aim is to explore the different pragmatic meanings for these signs.

2.3 The importance of handy signs

Allan Pease & Barbara Pease (2004:125) show the importance of hands to our body, that the scientists stress the direct nervous connections between the human minds and their hands. Also, their position beside the waist which makes it easy and observed whenever they are moved in any situation. So , all that help the human beings to express any feeling or emotion or even make a trade handy mark, like the Arabic situation of putting your two hands opened on your cheeks with opened eyes and mouth to express the feeling of 'shocked person', or making a thumbs-up sign to evaluate the 'Pepsi Cola' taste as very good.

They (ibid:127) add that in different countries like Italian and French, handy signs are used as 'punctuation marks' to manage talking among interlocutors, as the used sign of 'Handy Raised Gesture' , while it is seldom in England to use hands. They even consider the sign of waving hands as a shame or something abnormal.

Then, they (ibid:128) stress the idea that " using hand gestures grabs attention, increase the impact of communication and helps individuals retain more of the information they are hearing". For this, when someone acts by his hand as spreading cobweb, every one sees him will deduct that he is performing the character of Spiderman.

Ammar (2014) shows the importance of knowing the handy signs of each culture that " you don't speak Arabic until you speak it with your hands". She (ibid) adds that just observing the handy signs between two persons is enough to know what they are talking about without the need to hear them.

Section Three

Procedures and Data Analysis

3. The Model, Data and Procedures

Through out the analytical side, the model of the authors (Armstrong & Wagner) in their book (Field Guide to Gestures) is going to be traced, which is clear and sufficient in explaining and arranging the information of the sign, as well as giving the variation in the meaning of signs that will be helpful in interpreting the supposed miscommunication, as well as the pragmatic analysis of (Yule G.) in his book (Pragmatics) which will illustrate the exact meaning of the different signs.

The data is pictured by taking photos by mobile phone to the eight Iraqi handy signs, which are acted by an Iraqi volunteer. The chosen handy signs are so common in Iraqi everyday interaction. So, choosing one person to act them is enough, as well as the main aim of the research is to recognize the possible intended meanings for each sign to show how pragmatic miscommunication may arise.

The procedures that are going to be followed: first of all, the common name and the photo of the sign is going to be represented. Then, the execution of the sign in the interaction is going to be cleared. Finally, the variation in meaning and the possible contexts that are coped with each sign will be mentioned to interpret the pragmatic misunderstanding.

One should shed the light on the possible miscommunication which is going to be held in this study. The studied cases have the common shared environment that the interaction among the interlocutors is done by handy signs without the help of uttered words. So, the supposed environments are either of persons communicate far from each other, or in situations, places where talking is not allowed.

3.1 Data analysis

1- 'Bye...Bye' sign.



Fig. (3) bye ... bye

- **Execution :**

- a. Open your hand and spread your fingers, in front of your lower chest.
- b. Wave your hand to the left and right, more than three waves.

Variation : the common meaning is to say 'Good Bye' for a group or someone else. The other is to say ' No!!!' for not doing something.

Contexts : the context of waving for ' good bye', is imagined to be in an airport , bus station, students waving for their classmates when the daily classes are ended in school...etc. , while the possible contexts for 'No!!!' are either to act it for not doing something forbidden or to perform a high prevention of not doing an illegal matter especially among lawyers, official employees.

Pragmatic miscommunication: the confusion between the two possible meanings may happen when someone signs for another to come in or to invite him for a lunch , but instead, the other leaves with waving hand. Here, the first person will be confused if the waving means 'no... I'll not come' or just a case of saying ' good bye... I am leaving'.

2- 'Un satisfaction' sign .



Fig (4), un satisfaction

- **Execution :**

- a. Open your hand not so tightly, in front of your lower chest beside your waist.
- b. Wave the whole arm to the left and right, twice or more.

- **Variation :** the common meaning of this sign is to say 'I am surprised and not satisfied of this matter' for a group or someone else. The other is expressing the performance of 'roasting meat' that the hand is an indication of the plate which is used to heat the coals when the meat is roasted.

- **Contexts :** the context of the 'un satisfaction' meaning may happen when you know that someone or your friend did something abnormal or not expected, then you blame him through acting this sign. The context of 'roasting meat' is supposed in an interaction among friends, when some of them offers for them to have a roasting meat in dinner tonight, performing the sign in fig (4).

- **Pragmatic miscommunication:** the miscommunication between the two possible meanings may happen when the case that two friends (A) and (B) are apart on the opposite sides of the street,

and it happens that (A) has been promised (B) to have roasted meat tonight. At the moment (B) tries to cross the crowded street wrongly, which makes (A) unsatisfied of that, acting the sign above in fig (4). Then (B) may have confusion in the interpretation of the sign. Does (A) blame him or want to remind him about the roasting meat invitation?

3- ' So cold ' sign.

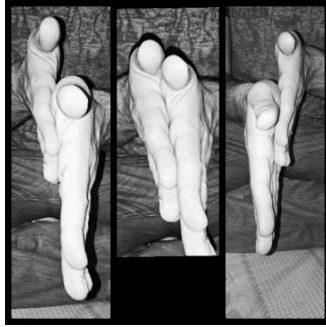


Fig (5), so cold

- **Execution :**
 - a. Open your hands tightly, in front of your body.
 - b. Rub the palms together by moving them forwards and backwards. Repeat the action more than three times.
- **Variation:** the common meaning of this sign is used in winter when the environment is so cold, then people use this movement to keep their hands warm. The other meaning is special for Iraqi people who use it whenever they expect an increase in salary or anything excellent is expected to happen in future. The latter could have the meaning of 'praising to Allah' by saying the Iraqi utterance [Ya Allah!!!].
- **Contexts :** the context of the ' so cold ' meaning may happen every time you feel cold, especially in winter. The meaning of ' praising to Allah' may happen for example when some one surprises his friend of the increasing in their salaries. That may make the two men acting the sign of [Ya Allah], as it showed in fig (5).
- **Pragmatic miscommunication:** misunderstanding may arise in winter when two friends are far from each other – they were expecting an increase in their salary- that one of them starts to act the above sign, but the other one on the next side is confusing in interpreting the sign, if his friend means the increase matter or only trying to warm his hands.

4- ' Be Patient ' sign.



Fig (6), Be Patient

- **Execution :**

- a. Gather your fifth fingers. Keep them attached with the thumb, forming a triangle where its top is to the high direction.
 - b. Now, move your wrist up and down, or move the whole arm up and down very slightly.
- **Variation:** the common meaning of this sign is 'Be patient!', while the other used meaning can be interpreted as ' Hmm!! Just wait ... I am coming!!' which represents a sort of threatening.
 - **Contexts :** the context of the common meaning ' Be patient' is done in cases like, when someone is quick in his reaction for a special situation where it is required a comfortable reply. Then his friend remind him to be patient through using this sign. The another meaning is likely happened when someone wants to threat his son or any child for not doing something out of the parent's control, or as a pre warning for the coming punishment.
 - **Pragmatic miscommunication:** miscommunication is likely to happen among the parents and their sons, that the usual use of this sign as a threat by the parents may delete the main meaning of 'Be patient' for children. The matter that they remain interpreting the sign as a threat even if the parents' intention were innocent.

5- ' Stop!' sign.



Fig (7), Stop

- **Execution :**

- a. Open your hand and keep the fingers attached. Let the arm in front of your body, beside your waist.
 - b. With your opened hand, the palm should be facing the receiver .
- **Variation:** the common meaning for this sign is ' Stop!', while the other possible used meanings are 'No!... I don't' , ' please !...Don't do that' or ' No!...I can't'. But this sign will have another two meanings if the hand moves in a pulse action, resembling two lightly pushes forwards. The first meaning will indicate the case of pushing the vocal horn in the steering wheel of the car, indicating the meaning of 'Be careful!!', while the other meaning is interpreted as ' keep calm... Don't worry!'.
 - **Contexts :** the context of the common meaning ' Stop!' is an official sign which is used by traffic officer to stop drivers, as well as , it is used in every case which needs to stop the action as soon as possible. The other local use is the reply 'No!' of disapproval for invitations, offers and other

ability questions. For the same sign, but with a pulse movement. The indication of using the horn of the car will be done among people to warn each other if they do quick or danger actions, trying to say: 'Give it ... a horn push'. The other interpretation is the intention of 'keep calm !!' or 'every thing is okay!' which is acted for nervous people in different situations.

- **Pragmatic miscommunication:** when the hand is rigid, miscommunication is likely to happen when you are climbing the wall to repair an electrical dangerous wire with making a sign of 'come here!' to your friend who is in a far distance. Your friend reply with the sign above in fig (7). In this case, your interpretation will be mixed. Does he mean 'No!... I can't' or trying to prevent you of repairing the dangerous wire by saying 'Stop!'.

If the hand in the sign above is moving like a pulse, the misunderstanding is likely to happen when you are driving the car and suddenly a woman with her child are trying to cross the street. That lets you brake the car suddenly. At that moment, the women performs the pulsing sign for you. Does she mean that I have to warn her by 'pushing the horn' of the car or just to 'keep calm !!' and do not hurry up.

6- 'Where are you going?' sign.



Fig (8), Where are you going?

- **Execution :**
 - a. Open your hand facing the top. The fingers are half twisted as a water wave. The arm besides the waist.
 - b. Now, move your hand left and right repeatedly about three times.
- **Variation:** the common meaning of this sign is 'where are you going?', while the other used meaning can be interpreted as 'what's up man ?' or 'What's wrong with you?'.
- **Contexts :** the context of the common meaning 'Where are you going ?' is used for asking by a handy sign about the place or the direction that someone wants to go to. The meaning of 'What's wrong with you?' indicates a question about someone's manner after doing something abnormal or seeing him in a bad temper.
- **Pragmatic miscommunication:** miscommunication is more common with this handy sign, because the two interpretations represent a question. Imagine if there are two friends stands far from each other. One of them is shouting loudly for a reason while he is walking. The other one

acts the sign in fig (8). Here, the first one will be confused of the intention of the sign. If it is a question of 'What's up man?' about 'shouting loudly' on the street, or a question of 'Where are you going?' about 'walking faraway'. The common reply from the first one will be the same handy sign, as an indication of miscommunication through replying by a question for a previous question.

7- 'Stand up' sign.



Fig (9), Stand up

- **Execution :**
 - a. Open your hand, keeping the palm direction to the top.
 - b. Move your wrist up and freeze it.
- **Variation:** the well known meaning of this sign is 'Stand up!', while the other used meaning can be interpreted as 'Come on! ... let's go' .
- **Contexts :** the context of the first meaning 'Stand up!' is mostly known in the classes when the teacher signs to a student to stand up while he is speaking. The other meaning could be made when two friends have been decided to go home to have lunch at (2 pm). So, at the exact time, one of them sign for the other as in fig (9), indicating 'Come on!...let's go'.
- **Pragmatic miscommunication:** misunderstanding may happen for instance, when a student sees the sign is done to him by his teacher. So, he immediately stands up while the teacher wants him to come to the board to write the solution. That always needs from the teacher to repeat the sign again to remove pragmatic miscommunication from the student's mind.

8- 'Sit down!' sign .



Fig (10), Sit down

- **Execution :**
 - a. Open your hand, keeping the palm direction downwards.
 - b. Move your wrist down and freeze it..
- **Variation:** the common meaning of this sign is 'Sit down!', while the other used meaning is 'Take it easy!' or 'Don't worry!'
- **Contexts :** the context of the common meaning ' Sit Down!' can be seen when you sign to someone to sit down, while the other meaning may happen when someone breaks something precious and his friend sign as in fig (10), to indicate the intention of 'Don't worry!... I'll fix it'.
- **Pragmatic miscommunication:** the confusion in communication may appear for instance in the hall of the court when one of the attendance stands and object to the sentence of the judge. At that moment, one of the guards signs to this person using the sign in fig (10). But that person understands the sign as just ' Sit down' which keeps him objecting loudly. In fact, the guard's intention was a collection of the two meanings that this person should 'sit down' and 'take it easy'.

Section Four

Conclusions

The research has come up with the following conclusions:

1. The chosen Iraqi handy signs have different meanings, depending on the various contexts that governs the intended interpretation. For instance, the sign in fig (6) has two different meanings of 'Be patient' and 'threatening ' according to their special contexts. The same appears clearly for other signs.
2. Miscommunication level increases when the interlocutors communicate with each other through using signs without the help of words. As the research reveals in its analytical side, that a lot of cases of misunderstanding could be avoided by just saying words. For example, the sign of 'Stand up' in fig (9) could be interpreted very well if the teacher simply said 'Come on!!' to help the student to understand the meaning of going to the board without the pragmatic failure of just standing. This also could be helpful and applicable for other analyzed signs.

3. Developing the pragmatic and the shared socio-cultural competences of the common used handy signs will help interlocutors to avoid misunderstanding among them and could convey the real meaning of every sign in each special context. That is obvious in fig (4), the sign of 'un satisfaction'. If (B) knows only the meaning of 'roasted meat' for this sign, he will exclude the meaning of 'un satisfaction' of (A) for (B)'s wrongly cross. Then, that will show impolite manner from (B) for not caring about (A)'s blaming intention.

Sometimes, even the shared conventions of the sign will not be helpful. In fig (8), the first person who walks forward and shouts loudly, knows very well the two questions which are indicated by this sign, but he remains hesitated of not recognizing which one is intended by the signer on the opposite side.

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