

CULTURE AND GAZE DIRECTION IN CONVERSATION

by
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This study examined whether culture plays a role in gaze and mutual gaze behaviours in simulated doctor/patient conversations. Participants were 40 Canadians and 40 Chinese who formed 40 dyads in four experimental conditions: Canadian speaker/Canadian listener, Chinese speaker/Chinese listener, Chinese speaker/Canadian listener, and Canadian speaker/Chinese listener. All conversations were video-taped and micro-analysed. The data generated three intriguing findings. First, a strong cultural difference in gaze frequency and duration was found between Chinese/Chinese and Canadian/Canadian dyads when the two most likely confounders, gender and conversation topic, were controlled for. This finding provides further illustration to Patterson's cultural explanation for gaze behaviours. Second, the gaze pattern convergence of the Chinese when interacting with Canadians has provided strong support for Communication Accommodation theory (CAT). This finding extends the usefulness of CAT in explaining human gaze behaviours in inter-cultural interactions. Third, the difference in gaze patterns between participants in the doctor and the patient roles, while speaking, has important implications for health communication, especially when health providers and patients are of different cultural backgrounds. Nonverbal mismatches may well be one of the contributing factors in provider-patient miscommunication reported in the literature.

1. Introduction

Past research indicates that eye contact serves an important communicative function, and that cultural upbringing dictates the way we gaze and mutual gaze (Argyle, Ingham, Alkema and McCallin 1972; Kendon 1967; Kleinke 1986). For example, Pierson and Bond (1982) found that Chinese conversational partners, representing an Asian culture, don't usually look directly at each other's eyes, whereas Whites, representing a western culture, tend to look each other in the eye during conversation (LaFrance and Mayo 1978). This difference in the way persons from Eastern and Western cultures exhibit eye contact poses interesting questions as to the nature and effectiveness of conversations when the two cultures are juxtaposed. Yet, research on