

# **BODY LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK SOMATIC EXPRESSIONS**

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## **Abstract**

This study addresses somatism-based paralinguistic communication in both Uzbek and English, researching in detail how parts of the body and its motions convey meaning and embody cultural values. Employing comparative analysis, the study compares expression through several types of language structures, including idiomatic, proverb, and gestural forms. In its analysis, both general and specific cultural aspects of nonverbal expression become evident, with head nod and head shaking, for example, being proven to have a level of universality, but with variation in connotations and symbolic values regarding specific parts of the body in each language. In both instances, Uzbek language tends to evoke community values and reverence towards elders, such as clasped hands and "oq fotiha" ritual, and in contrast, English language tends to evoke individuality and mastery over emotion. Overall, these observations present a strong case for awareness of cultures in cross-cultural communication, in that nonverbal cues can have immensely disparate meanings in cultures, and for deeper analysis of language, culture, and nonverbal behavior, opening doors for a new level of effective cross-cultural practice.

**Keywords:** Nonverbal communication, paralinguistics, kinesics, somatisms, cross-cultural communication, English, Uzbek, body language, gestures, cultural values, collectivism, individualism, semantics, pragmatics.

## **Introduction**

Communication, the basis of human contact, is not simply a matter of verbal exchange. It is a rich tapestry of verbal and nonverbal messages that inform our view of one another and of our environment. As verbal and printed language transmit the explicit message, nonverbal communication is the quiet conductor, lending depth, nuance, and emotionality to our contact with one another and with our environment. This unspoken language, a rich lexicon of face, gesture, postures, and even voice inflections, can speak louder and with a deeper impact than any verbal message, conveying unspoken meanings, unspoken feelings, and complex social cues. It is critical to creating rapport, to social negotiation, and to reading one's intent and state of mind. From a passing glance to a strong handshake, nonverbal messages shape and re-shape the terms of our interpersonal contact at every turn.

Within the rich tapestry of non-verbal communications, kinesics, or body language, plays an important part. Kinesics consists of both conscious and unconscious postures and motions of the body, including gestures, face, eye contact, and distance between bodies. Kinesics is a powerful channel for communicating feelings, attitude, and purpose, and in many instances, can circumvent verbal expression altogether. A creased brow can say a lot about concern, a raised hand can say a lot about a question, and a warm hug can say a lot about caring, and yet no sound is ever heard. Kinesics is a rich source of information about the complex way in which humans convey and interpret meaning through bodily expression.

A significant aspect of kinesics is the use of somatisms – terms and phrases drawn from parts of the body. Somatisms are not mere anatomical terms; they become loaded with symbolic connotations, representing social conventions, values, and beliefs. Body parts, through function and value, can become metaphors for a range of concepts, feelings, and social relations. For example, "the head" is associated with intelligence and leadership, and "the heart" with emotion and with love. Body part-related motion and activity lend a rich symbolic connotation. Nodding of head can connote agreement, and a hand gesture can connote many in many cultures. These terms derived through somatism become part of paralinguistic communications – non-verbal cues accompanying and modulating verbal communications.

While the study of somatisms acquired a high level of prominence in many branches of linguistics, such as idiom and phraseology analysis (e.g., Shanskiy, 1985; Isayev, 1976), a significant lack of in-depth cross-linguistic studies of somatism-based paralinguistic speech can be noticed in the field. That lack is most striking when comparing language pairs representing disparate language stocks and cultures. Most studies in one language, and even in closely-related ones, have little regard for cross-cultural and typological ones. For example, studies of somatisms in Russian (Gak, 2000; Bagdasarova, 2004) and Japanese (Xosino, 1976; Reznikova, 2016) have useful information in one language and cultural environment but lack a comparative perspective. Similarly, studies of somatisms in Uzbek (Baxronova, 2021; Gadoyeva, 2022) lack a cross-linguistic orientation in many instances.

This research aims to bridge such a divide through a comparative and contrastive analysis of expression of somatic units in both English and Uzbek, with a view towards use in paralinguistic communication. Two Indo-European and Turkic language groups, namely, English and Uzbek, represent two vastly different typological and cultural settings. Such variation creates an exciting opportunity for an investigation of both general and specific cultural aspects of nonverbal behavior in terms of somatism. Comparing and contrasting use in both language groups, this study aims to unveil underpinnings, detect cultural variation, and contribute towards a deeper analysis of complex interrelationship between language, culture, and nonverbal behavior.

The methodology in this work involves comparative analysis of somatic expressions and their background in both English and Uzbek. Analysis will use a range of language sources, including dictionaries, collections of idiom, collections of proverb, and studies in nonverbal communication (full detail in Methods section). Comparing these sources, in an attempt to obtain a complete picture of both languages' somatism-based paralinguistic communication and principal similarities and differences between them, analysis will attend to semantic dimensions of such expressions, with a view to meanings conveyed through specific bodily motions and postures. Besides, the work will investigate cultural background of such expressions, including cultural values and norms and how these affect use and interpretation of them.

### **Methods**

This research follows a comparative, qualitative methodology in investigating representations of somatic units in English and Uzbek paralinguistic communication. The review encompasses a range of language units, including idiomatics, sayings, blessings, and maledictions, and other language forms involving a part of a body in them. Overall, analysis is done by referring to dictionaries, e.g., "The Great Russian Encyclopedia" (Yartseva, 1998), idiom and phraseology dictionaries (Bolshoy frazeologicheskiy slovar russkogo yazyka, 2006), and research studies focused specifically on investigating somatisms (e.g., Gadoyeva, 2022;

Kochevatkin, 1998). Apart from that, pertinent studies in non-verbal communication and cross-cultural pragmatics (e.g., Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 2005; Argyle, 1994; Poyatos, 1988; Knapp, 1972) have been incorporated in the review, offering a rich foundation for investigating semantic and cultural facets of somatism-related language forms.

Beyond the analysis of literature, analysis of actual language samples drawn from a range of settings forms part of the study. Included in these are observation of naturally produced speech, analysis of dialogue in television and cinema, and analysis of web communications. Actual language samples provide significant information regarding use of terms with a basis in somatism in real communicative environments, and contribute towards enriching information gained through analysis of literature. With such a dual analysis, a fuller and deeper picture of the researched phenomenon is constructed.

The collected information is examined through a comparative lens, with an eye towards semantic analysis and cultural background. Semantic analysis entails a consideration of meaning conveyed through a specific part motion and gesture involved in a somatism. That involves an examination of both the root semantic unit of each expression and any connotations and nuance involved. For instance, in English, "to turn a blind eye" utilizes the somatic unit "eye" and connotes willful ignoring of a matter. Semantic analysis takes into consideration the interrelationship between part of the body, activity involved, and derived meaning. Likewise, in Uzbek, "ko'ziga tuproq sochmoq" (to throw dust in one's eyes) utilizes the somatism "eye" and connotes deceitfulness. Analysis seeks such correspondences and discrepancies in meaning between two languages.

Cultural context is important in explaining and construing meaning in terms of somatic cues. Analysis, therefore, considers cultural values, customs, and beliefs about individual parts of the body and its motion in both English and in Uzbek cultures. For example, head nodding signifies agreement in most Western cultures, including in English-speaking cultures. In a few cultures, a similar nod, however, could mean a different message. In a similar manner, a similar motion with hands considered in one society polite could become offensive in a different society. By studying such cultural sensitivities, analysis aims at unveiling cultural underpinnings in cues in terms of somatism and investigating through them cross-cultural communicative competence. Drawing examples from works such as Hall, Horgan, and Murphy (2019) and Qodirova (2021), analysis studies cultural dimensions of nonverbal cues and their impact in intercultural relations.

The selection of English and Uzbek for examination in this study is motivated for a range of factors. First, both represent typologically contrastive language groups, offering a rich opportunity for an analysis of tension between language-particular and universally present dimensions of nonverbal behavior. Second, the bilingual environment of Uzbekistan, in which both English and Uzbek have widespread use, affords a rich field for observation of speakers' behavior in transitioning between communicative frameworks. It permits both shared and language-particular nonverbal cues to be elicited. Third, existing studies of nonverbal behavior in both languages, such as works by Saidxonov (2008), Axmedov (2021), and Kurbanov (2021), offer a sound basis for comparative analysis. Fourth, and most centrally, the current study forms part of an emerging corpus of work in cross-cultural communication, shedding light on the contribution of nonverbal cues to intercultural encounters.

## Results

This section compares and contrasted somatism-inspired paralinguistic expression in both English and Uzbek, thematized according to parts of the body. Examples in both

languages for each part of the body have been analyzed, noting both similarities and differences, and explaining them in terms of cultural background.

The head, with its intelligence and leadership connotations, is a salient feature in English paralinguistic expression. Nodding one's head carries connotations of agreement and understanding, and shaking one's head carries connotations of disapproving and not agreeing. "To have a cool head" carries connotations of calm and logical thinking in times of strain, a reflection of Western cultures' value placed on mastering one's feelings. Other idiomatic sayings, including "to bury one's head in the sand" (to avoid a problem) and "to be head over heels" (to fall deep in love with one's work, for example, or with a new lover), serve to illustrate the head's metaphorical use in representing encountering and avoiding obstacles and strong feelings.

Similar to English, a lot of symbolic value is placed in a head in Uzbek society. "To reject" is "bosh tortmoq" (to turn one's head), and "to agree" is "bosh qo'shmoq" (to add one's head). "To have one's head in the sky" is "boshi osmonga yetdi," and it connotes extreme happiness or pride. In addition, "oq fotiha" (the white blessing), a ritualistic expression of elders' blessings, tends to include putting a hand over one's head, connoting deference and requesting guidance. All of these examples represent cultural values of deference to elders and harmony in society in Uzbek society.

Both Uzbek and English use head motions to convey agreement and disagreement, and therefore, a level of universality in nonverbal expression can be argued for in these cases. Yet, in examples drawn from Uzbek, a greater concern for shared values and deference for age can be seen in such a ritual as "oq fotiha." In contrast, the English examples have a bias towards individualism and emotion management.

The eyes, sometimes "windows to the soul," serve an important role in communicating feelings and social information. In Western cultures, direct eye contact signifies attentiveness and deference, but not returning eye contact signifies disinterest or insincerity. Idioms "to raise an eyebrow" (to register a surprised reaction, for instance, to a statement one hears for the first time, and "to see eye to eye" (to agree with one's eyes, in a figurative use of "eye") reveal even small eye motion's communicative value. "To turn a blind eye" is an idiom that reveals a cultural preference for direct resolution of a problem, even an uncomfortable one.

Eye contact in Uzbek conversation is significant, but direct, sustained eye contact between two individuals of unequal social rank can be offensive. "To wink" (ko'z o'ynatmoq) carries a connotation of shared confidence or teasing flirting, and "may the evil eye not touch" (ko'z tegmasin) carries a superstition about jealous eyes having a strong effect. "To throw dust in one's eyes" (ko'ziga tuproq sochmoq) carries a connotation of deceit, similar to "to pull one's eyes over" in English.

Both cultures use eye contact and facial expressions to convey social cues and emotion. Yet, both cultures interpret eye contact differently, and therefore, cultural awareness is critical in nonverbal communications. That both cultures have a similar idiom for lying attests to a shared humanity in being misled and in misleading.

English is full of hand actions, ranging from simple pointing to complex symbolic actions. Firm shaking hands expresses confidence and professionalism, and a thumbs-up expresses approval or encouragement. Idioms "to give a hand" (to help) and "to wash one's hands of something" (to distance oneself) refer to hands' association with activity and accountability. Idiom "to have one's hands tied" mirrors the individualistic cultural orientation and disappointment at not being in a position to act.

Hand gestures in Uzbek language are no less important, and in most cases, convey respect, gratefulness, and even supplication. "Qo'l qovushtirmoq" (to clasp hands) signifies respect, specifically when communicating with elders and persons in a position of authority. "Qo'l bermoq" (to shake hands) signifies greeting, agreement, and consent. "Qo'li ochiq" (open-handed) signifies a hospitable and kind individual, and it signifies the values of hospitality and largesse in a society. "Qo'lini qaytarmoq" (to turn one's hand), signifies to restrain a person from an act.

English and Uzbek languages make general use of hand gestures, but both individual gestures and meanings can vary immensely. Examples in Uzbek represent a concern with deference to age and social rank, but examples in English represent a concern with individual act and accountability.

Beyond the head, eyes, and hands, other parts of the body, such as the "yurak" (heart), "oyoq" (legs/feet), and "til" (tongue), enter into paralinguistic use in both languages, too. In Uzbek, for example, heart is closely associated with feelings, such as in "yuragi yonmoq" (their heart burns), in order to mean to be passionate, in love, etc. "Oyoq" enters into "Vatan tuprog'iga oyoq qo'ymoq" (to set foot in one's homeland), accentuating one's relation to one's origin. "Til" (tongue) is associated with speech and speaking, such as in "og'iz juftlamoq" (to quarrel, to dispute, to have a dispute with one's tongue, i.e., with one's mouth, but specifically with one's tongue, with one's speech, with one's language, with one's mouth, etc.). In English, "to have one's heart in one's mouth" connotes fright, apprehensiveness, "to have cold feet" connotes hesitation, and "to bite one's tongue" connotes not speaking, not saying a word, etc. All

Somatisms also play a significant role in larger communicative environments such as rituals, etiquette, and expression of emotion. In Uzbek, for example, "oq fотиha" (the white blessing) ritual involves such behavior as laying a hand over a head and pronouncing blessings, representing deference and solicitation of guidance from seniors (Mo'minov, 2000). In contrast, in English etiquette, one tends to maintain distance and not overengage in bodily contact. Expressions of emotion, too, vary between cultures. In contrast to free expression of mourning in specific Uzbek environments, for example, in Anglo-American society, one tends to inhibit emotion expression. All these go towards explaining the imperative for an awareness of norm and practice of a culture when reading nonverbal cues.

### **Discussion**

This study delved into the complex universe of somatism-related paralinguistic communication in both English and Uzbek, unearthing both striking similarities and profound cultural differences. Through an examination of a variety of expression and gesture linked with a range of parts of the body, we have gained a rich picture of how such non-verbal cues contribute to meaning and represent cultural values.

One of the most striking observations of such a comparison is the universality of certain nonverbal cues, most particularly for agreement and disagreement, two of the most primal of human experiences. Nods for agreement and head shaking for disbelief, for instance, appear to transverse both language and cultural borders, and connote a shared, species-specific consciousness of such simple communicative cues. This observation is consonant with experiments in nonverbal universals, in which certain feelings and accompanying expression have been argued to have a biological basis (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). Even in such universally shared cues, variation in performance and interpretation can, however, occur. For instance, both speakers of English and speakers of Uzbek nod for agreement, but with variation in terms



of frequency, intensity, and accompanying face and head position, according to cultural convention and individual communicative style.

The most important contrasts between English and Uzbek somatism-based communication involve cultural connotations and symbolic meanings of individual parts and actions of face and body. Examples in Uzbek reveal a strong orientation towards community values, deference to elders, and social hierarchy. "Qo'l qovushtirmoq" (hand clasping) and "oq fotiha" (ritual of white blessing) reveal the cultural value placed on deference and taking direction from seniors in position (Mo'minov, 2000; O'.Qodirova, 2021). These terms reveal a collectivist worldview, in which social harmony and deference towards custom is most important. By contrast, English non-verbal communication tends to value individual agency, emotionality, and direct challenge resolution. "To keep a cool head" and "to turn a blind eye" reveal the cultural value placed on independence, emotionality, and direct challenge resolution. These terms reveal an individualistic worldview, in which individual responsibility and expression is most important.

These findings have significant consequences for explaining relations between language, culture, and nonverbal communication. They suggest that, while a portion of nonverbal cues can be regarded as universal, most of them are constructed through culture and resonate with a society's values and conceptions regarding reality. Somatism terms, in accessing part of the body's symbolic connotations, form a powerful tool for accessing conceptions regarding reality in a society and communicative conventions. Besides, the findings verify that cultural background plays a significant role in explaining nonverbal cues. What in one society connotes deference can in a different society connote offensiveness and inappropriateness. Hence, becoming communicatively competent in a cross-cultural encounter not only involves language mastery but awareness of nonverbal cues and meaning in a society.

This study enriches existing works in paralinguistics and cross-cultural communications through a comparative analysis of speech in two typologically contrasted languages. On a basis of preceding works, focused almost exclusively on individual language and closely cognate language groups (e.g., Stoyanova, 2005; Gudkov, 2003; Kreydlin, 2004), in this work, English and Uzbek speech is compared and contrasted, providing new information about tension between general and specific cultural factors in nonverbal behavior. Besides, it accentuates the need for semantic and cultural analysis in researching nonverbal behavior. This work harmonizes with modern works accentuating the need for a deeper analysis of nonverbalism in communicative settings (Malysheva, 2017). Besides, it enriches existing works in linguocultural studies through an example of language and its reflection and strengthening of cultural values and customs (Xamdanova, 2023).

This study is not free of its weaknesses, first and foremost its use of secondary sources, whose characterization of nonverbal communication in actual encounters can fall short of its actual, ever-changing nature. Analysis, moreover, is performed through a reading of information collected, and, as such, carries a potential for researcher bias. As much an attempt is being made to counteract such bias with sound methodologies and triangulation of sources, one must concede a weakness in qualitative work in its interpretative nature.

Future research directions should focus on empirical studies involving observation of natural language use in both English and Uzbek contexts. This would provide valuable insights into the frequency, variability, and contextual factors influencing the use of somatism-based expressions. Furthermore, future research could explore the role of individual differences, such as age, gender, and social status, in nonverbal communication. For instance, research by

Axmedov (2021), Annazarova and Islomjonova (2018), and Qodirova (2021) has touched upon the gendered aspects of nonverbal communication, suggesting a promising avenue for future investigation. Studies could also investigate the acquisition and development of nonverbal communicative competence in bilingual individuals, exploring how they navigate between different nonverbal systems. Finally, research could explore the neural and cognitive processes underlying the production and comprehension of nonverbal communication, bridging the gap between linguistic analysis and cognitive science.

## Conclusion

This comparative analysis of English and Uzbek somatism-based paralinguistic speech has thrown new light onto the complex nexus of language, culture, and nonverbal expression. What is most important about these observations is that, even when cultural values and social norms have a profound impact on speech use through our use of our bodies, certain fundamental nonverbal cues transcend both language and cultures.

The study revealed common experiences between humans in nonverbal cues, namely in head movements for agreement and disagreement, and postulated a level of universality in basic communicative cues, perhaps stemming from our common evolutionary heritage. Nevertheless, even such universally postulated cues have a level of variation in performance and interpretation, confirming that nonverbal cues have a complex nature.

The most salient divergences between Uzbek and English involve cultural connotations and symbolic values located in specific regions of the body and in specific actions. Paralinguistic expression in Uzbek values community values, deference, and social rank, for instance, in clasped hands and in "oq fotiha" ritual. These embody a collectivist orientation in which social harmony and custom have high value. In contrast, English nonverbal expression tends to value individualism, mastery over emotion, and directness, such as in "keeping a cool head" and "turning a blind eye." These embody a more individualistic cultural orientation, valuing individual expression and responsibility.

The implications of these findings extend beyond theoretical linguistics. They underscore the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in intercultural communication. Recognizing that nonverbal cues can have vastly different meanings across cultures is essential for avoiding misunderstandings and fostering effective communication. A gesture intended as polite in one culture could be interpreted as rude or disrespectful in another. Therefore, developing intercultural competence requires not only linguistic proficiency but also a nuanced understanding of nonverbal communication patterns.

This study has contributed to the field of paralinguistics by providing a cross-linguistic analysis of somatism-based expressions in two typologically distinct languages. It has expanded our understanding of how cultural values are embedded in nonverbal communication and how these values contribute to distinct communicative styles. The research has also highlighted the importance of considering both semantic and cultural context in analyzing nonverbal cues.

The limitations of this study, primarily the reliance on existing literature and the potential for researcher bias, suggest avenues for future research. Empirical studies involving observation of natural language use are crucial for capturing the full complexity and dynamism of nonverbal communication. Further investigation into the influence of individual factors like age, gender, and social status, as well as the neural and cognitive processes underlying nonverbal communication, will enrich our understanding of this multifaceted phenomenon.

This research emphasizes the vital role of nonverbal communication in human interaction and the profound influence of culture on its expression. By recognizing and acknowledging the cultural underpinnings of nonverbal cues, specifically those with a basis in somatisms, we can develop a deeper level of intercultural awareness and forge a deeper level of connectivity between cultures. This work opens doors for continued investigation into the rich and complex tapestry of human communication, allowing for a future with a heightened level of effective and sensitive communication in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent society.

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