

60c

a Premier Book



# THE SILENT LANGUAGE



*The spoken language is only one means  
of communication . . . a leading  
anthropologist reveals how people "talk"  
to each other without the use of words*

by EDWARD T. HALL



Though the United States has spent billions of dollars on foreign aid programs, it has captured neither the affection nor the esteem of the rest of the world. In many countries today Americans are cordially disliked; in others merely tolerated . . . Most of our behavior does not spring from malice but from ignorance, which is as grievous a sin in international relations. It is time Americans learned how to communicate effectively with foreign nationals. Americans sent abroad to deal with other peoples should not only be taught to speak and read the language, but be thoroughly trained in the *culture* of the country. We don't need more missiles and H-bombs nearly so much as we need specific knowledge of ourselves as participants in a culture.

—*Dr. Edward Hall*

**". . . original and  
stimulating . . . scholarly  
without ever being pedantic."  
—Washington Star**



# the silent language

by edward t. hall

***A Fawcett Premier Book***

Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.  
Member of American Book Publishers Council, Inc.

To my friends and colleagues from foreign cultures  
who taught me so much about my own culture.

A Fawcett Premier Book reprinted by arrangement with  
Doubleday & Company, Inc. This book contains  
the complete text of the original hardcover edition.

Copyright © 1959 by Edward T. Hall  
All rights reserved, including the right  
to reproduce this book or portions thereof.

#### PRINTING HISTORY

First Doubleday & Co. printing, January 1959  
Second printing, May 1959  
Third printing, March 1960

Eighth Fawcett Premier printing, December 1966

Published by Fawcett World Library,  
67 West 44th Street, New York, New York 10036.  
Printed in the United States of America.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My friend and mentor, Ralph Linton, once observed that each book he wrote "came out of his hide." At this point I have no difficulty accepting the credibility of his observation. I would like to add that this book exacted a toll from my family and especially my wife, who had to put up with my 5 A.M. hours, a curtailed social life, my own irascibility during critical stages of the manuscript, as well as many versions of the manuscript which she read, criticized, and corrected. Many books have been dedicated to the author's wife "without whose patience and understanding they would never have seen the light of day." It is easy to see why this dedication is so popular. Yet its popularity tends to detract from the impact of the message and somehow makes the efforts of the wife seem less important than they really are. I do not know how to express adequately my appreciation for the vital part my wife played in the production of this book. There were many times when I would have delayed or let other pressing obligations interrupt my writing if it had not been for her encouragement. My first acknowledgment, therefore, is to my wife, Mildred Reed Hall.

As an anthropologist and a scientist I owe a tremendous debt to my colleagues but especially to the late Ralph Linton, under whom I studied at Columbia University. We used to spend many pleasant hours together as he tried out ideas he was developing in an amazing range of subjects. As a student I used to find it difficult to communicate with professors and always experienced a gulf between us, not so much in status but in approach. With Linton this gulf was never present. He always seemed to be able to communicate clearly and enjoy a real exchange of ideas. While the content of this book is different from anything Linton would have writ-

ten, I have the feeling that he would have understood the ideas I am presenting.

Three other colleagues who provided encouragement and stimulation over the years are Erich Fromm, David Riesman, and John Useem. Much of the material in this book was worked out in collaboration with my friend and colleague, George L. Trager, professor of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Buffalo. During the early phases of our work together, Trager and I were assisted and encouraged by Edward A. Kennard, Ralph Kepler Lewis, and Henry Lee Smith, Jr. However, I must take full responsibility for the form and content of the book.

Many of the comments on other cultures are the result of direct observation and field work which I have done with the Spanish-American in New Mexico and Latin America, the Navajo, Hopi, Trukese, Western Mediterranean Arabs, and Iranians. Needless to say, the anthropologist always owes a great debt to the people he studies, because it is what he learns from them about their cultures that makes his own culture more meaningful.

Clarkson N. Potter first urged me to write this book and has provided the necessary encouragement and understanding for its completion. I wish to express my appreciation for editorial assistance to Richard K. Winslow and Kermit Lansner.

I wish to acknowledge the kindness of the following publishers who have permitted me to quote from these books:

“A Case of Identity” in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Reprinted by permission of the Trustees of the Estate of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and John Murray, Ltd.

*Language, Thought, and Reality*, Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, published jointly by the Technology Press and John Wiley & Sons of New York. Reprinted by permission.

# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	9
<i>chapter one</i> THE VOICES OF TIME	15
<i>chapter two</i> WHAT IS CULTURE?	31
<i>chapter three</i> THE VOCABULARY OF CULTURE	42
<i>chapter four</i> THE MAJOR TRIAD	63
<i>chapter five</i> CULTURE IS COMMUNICATION	93
<i>chapter six</i> THE PERVASIVE SET	99
<i>chapter seven</i> THE ILLUSIVE ISOLATE	106
<i>chapter eight</i> THE ORGANIZING PATTERN	111
<i>chapter nine</i> TIME TALKS: AMERICAN ACCENTS	128
<i>chapter ten</i> <u>SPACE SPEAKS</u>	146
<i>chapter eleven</i> LOOSENING THE GRIP	165
APPENDIX I      SCHEMA FOR SOCIAL SCIENTISTS	169
APPENDIX II     A MAP OF CULTURE	171
APPENDIX III    THREE EXAMPLES OF CHANGE	177
APPENDIX IV    SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	183
INDEX	187





## INTRODUCTION

Though the United States has spent billions of dollars on foreign aid programs, it has captured neither the affection nor esteem of the rest of the world. In many countries today Americans are cordially disliked; in others merely tolerated. The reasons for this sad state of affairs are many and varied, and some of them are beyond the control of anything this country might do to try to correct them. But harsh as it may seem to the ordinary citizen, filled as he is with good intentions and natural generosity, much of the foreigners' animosity has been generated by the way Americans behave.

As a country we are apt to be guilty of great ethnocentrism. In many of our foreign aid programs we employ a heavy-handed technique in dealing with local nationals. We insist that everyone else do things our way. Consequently we manage to convey the impression that we simply regard foreign nationals as "underdeveloped Americans." Most of our behavior does not spring from malice but from ignorance, which is as grievous a sin in international relations. We are not only almost totally ignorant of what is expected in other countries, we are equally ignorant of what we are communicating to other people by our own normal behavior.

It is not my thesis that Americans should be universally loved. But I take no consolation in the remark of a government official who stated that "we don't have to be liked just so long as we are respected." In most countries we are neither liked nor respected. It is time that Americans learned how to communicate effectively with foreign nationals. It is time that we stop alienating people with whom we are trying to work.

For many years I have been concerned with the selection and training of Americans to work in foreign coun-

tries for both government and business. I am convinced that much of our difficulty with people in other countries stems from the fact that so little is known about cross-cultural communication. Because of this lack, much of the good will and great effort of the nation has been wasted in its overseas programs. When Americans are sent abroad to deal with other peoples they should first be carefully selected as to their suitability to work in a foreign culture. They should also be taught to speak and read the language of the country of assignment and thoroughly trained in the culture of the country. All of this takes time and costs money. However, unless we are willing to select and train personnel, we simply sell ourselves short overseas.

Yet this formal training in the language, history, government, and customs of another nation is only the first step in a comprehensive program. Of equal importance is an introduction to the non-verbal language which exists in every country of the world and among the various groups within each country. Most Americans are only dimly aware of this silent language even though they use it every day. They are not conscious of the elaborate patterning of behavior which prescribes our handling of time, our spatial relationships, our attitudes toward work, play, and learning. In addition to what we say with our verbal language we are constantly communicating our real feelings in our silent language—the language of behavior. Sometimes this is correctly interpreted by other nationalities, but more often it is not.

Difficulties in intercultural communication are seldom seen for what they are. When it becomes apparent to people of different countries that they are not understanding one another, each tends to blame it on “those foreigners,” on their stupidity, deceit, or craziness. The following examples will illuminate some of these cross-cultural cross-purposes at their most poignant.

Despite a host of favorable auspices an American mission in Greece was having great difficulty working out an agreement with Greek officials. Efforts to negotiate met with resistance and suspicion on the part of the Greeks. The Americans were unable to conclude the agreements needed to start new projects. Upon later examination of this exasperating situation two unsuspected reasons were



found for the stalemate: First, Americans pride themselves on being outspoken and forthright. These qualities are regarded as a liability by the Greeks. They are taken to indicate a lack of finesse which the Greeks deplore. The American directness immediately prejudiced the Greeks. Second, when the Americans arranged meetings with the Greeks they tried to limit the length of the meetings and to reach agreements on general principles first, delegating the drafting of details to subcommittees. The Greeks regarded this practice as a device to pull the wool over their eyes. The Greek practice is to work out details in front of all concerned and continue meetings for as long as is necessary. The result of this misunderstanding was a series of unproductive meetings with each side deploring the other's behavior.

In the Middle East, Americans usually have a difficult time with the Arabs. I remember an American agriculturalist who went to Egypt to teach modern agricultural methods to the Egyptian farmers. At one point in his work he asked his interpreter to ask a farmer how much he expected his field to yield that year. The farmer responded by becoming very excited and angry. In an obvious attempt to soften the reply the interpreter said, "He says he doesn't know." The American realized something had gone wrong, but he had no way of knowing what. Later I learned that the Arabs regard anyone who tries to look into the future as slightly insane. When the American asked him about his future yield, the Egyptian was highly insulted since he thought the American considered him crazy. To the Arab only God knows the future, and it is presumptuous even to talk about it.

In Japan I once interviewed an American scholar who was sent to Japan to teach American history to Japanese university professors. The course was well under way when the American began to doubt if the Japanese understood his lectures. Since he did not speak Japanese, he asked for an interpreter. After a few lectures with the interpreter translating for him, the American asked the group to meet without him and make a report on what they were learning from the course. The next time the American met with the class the interpreter told him that the class understood only about 50 per cent of what had been going on. The American was discouraged and upset.

What he didn't know was that he had inadvertently insulted the group by requesting an interpreter. In Japan a sign of an educated man is his ability to speak English. The Japanese professors felt that the American had caused them to lose face by implying that they were uneducated when he requested the interpreter.

Americans often do so badly in their jobs overseas that military officers have a real fear of being assigned to some countries. I once heard a retired admiral talking to an army general about a mutual acquaintance. "Poor old Charley," lamented the admiral, "he got mixed up with those Orientals in the Far East and it ruined his career." Periodically, after an incident like the Girard case, which was a tragedy of errors by both American military and diplomatic personnel in Japan, there is a brief flurry of interest in "doing something about better selection of personnel for foreign assignment." As one Pentagon aide remarked, "At least we ought to be able to select them so they don't shoot the local civilians."

Obviously there are always going to be unavoidable incidents when our forces are stationed in foreign countries. Many of the incidents are made worse, however, by the inept way the Americans handle the consequences. When incidents do occur, the Americans rarely know how to act in such a way as to avoid adding fuel to the fire. They are usually blind to the fact that what passes as ordinary, acceptable American behavior is often interpreted in such a way by foreigners that it distorts our true sentiments or our intentions.

If this book does nothing more than to plant this idea, it will have served its purpose. Yet in writing these pages I have had a more ambitious goal. This book was written for the layman, the person who is at times perplexed by the life in which he finds himself, who often feels driven here and there by forces he does not understand, who may see others doing things that genuinely mystify him at home in America as well as overseas in another culture. I hope that I can show the reader that behind the apparent mystery, confusion, and disorganization of life there is order; and that this understanding will set him to re-examine the human world around him. I hope that it will also interest the reader in the subject of culture and lead him to follow his own interests and make his own observations.

Though they will probably disagree with some of the points I make, professionals in various specialized fields may find some useful insights in these pages. The architect might well learn to employ the knowledge available to him about space as a culturally patterned dimension in his work. The educator will undoubtedly bristle under some of my criticisms, yet I sincerely hope that he will find the analysis in this book useful in its application to teaching. My colleagues in the field of psychiatry will find concepts here useful in their therapy, just as my collaboration with psychiatrists has proved invaluable in the study of different varieties of communication. Writers, artists, businessmen, and management experts have all contributed substantially to my knowledge. It is to be hoped that the social scientist will find the concept of culture as communication relevant to his work.

In my research on culture I received invaluable collaboration from my colleague, George L. Trager. Trager is an anthropologically trained linguist who has made a number of important contributions to the study of language. Trager and I developed a theory of culture based on a communications model which is contained in this book and which gives it its theoretical underpinning.

The pages that follow have been arranged in such a way as to lead the reader gradually from the known to the unknown. It will be helpful if the reader thinks of culture as analogous to music. If a person hasn't heard music, it is impossible to describe. Before the days of written scores, people learned informally by imitation. Man was able to exploit the potential of music only when he started writing musical scores. This is what must be done for culture. This book represents the cultural analogue of a musical primer.





## CHAPTER ONE

### The Voices of Time

Time talks. It speaks more plainly than words. The message it conveys comes through loud and clear. Because it is manipulated less consciously, it is subject to less distortion than the spoken language. It can shout the truth where words lie.

I was once a member of a mayor's committee on human relations in a large city. My assignment was to estimate what the chances were of non-discriminatory practices being adopted by the different city departments. The first step in this project was to interview the department heads, two of whom were themselves members of minority groups. If one were to believe the words of these officials, it seemed that all of them were more than willing to adopt non-discriminatory labor practices. Yet I felt that, despite what they said, in only one case was there much chance for a change. Why? The answer lay in how they used the silent language of time and space.

Special attention had been given to arranging each interview. Department heads were asked to be prepared to spend an hour or more discussing their thoughts with me. Nevertheless, appointments were forgotten; long waits in outer offices (fifteen to forty-five minutes) were common, and the length of the interview was often cut down to ten or fifteen minutes. I was usually kept at an impersonal distance during the interview. In only one case did the department head come from behind his desk. These men had a position and they were literally and figuratively sticking to it!

The implication of this experience (one which public-opinion pollsters might well heed) is quite obvious. What people do is frequently more important than what they say. In this case the way these municipal potentates handled time was eloquent testimony to what they inwardly

believed, for the structure and meaning of time systems, as well as the time intervals, are easy to identify. In regard to being late there are: "mumble something" periods, slight apology periods, mildly insulting periods requiring full apology, rude periods, and downright insulting periods. The psychoanalyst has long been aware of the significance of communication on this level. He can point to the way his patients handle time as evidence of "resistances" and "transference."

Different parts of the day, for example, are highly significant in certain contexts. Time may indicate the importance of the occasion as well as on what level an interaction between persons is to take place. In the United States if you telephone someone very early in the morning, while he is shaving or having breakfast, the time of the call usually signals a matter of utmost importance and extreme urgency. The same applies for calls after 11:00 P.M. A call received during sleeping hours is apt to be taken as a matter of life and death, hence the rude joke value of these calls among the young. Our realization that time talks is even reflected in such common expressions as, "What time does the clock *say*?"

An example of how thoroughly these things are taken for granted was reported to me by John Useem, an American social anthropologist, in an illuminating case from the South Pacific. The natives of one of the islands had been having a difficult time getting their white supervisors to hire them in a way consistent with their traditional status system. Through ignorance the supervisors had hired too many of one group and by so doing had disrupted the existing balance of power among the natives. The entire population of the island was seething because of this error. Since the Americans continued in their ignorance and refused to hire according to local practice, the head men of the two factions met one night to discuss an acceptable reallocation of jobs. When they finally arrived at a solution, they went en masse to see the plant manager and woke him up to tell him what had been decided. Unfortunately it was then between two and three o'clock in the morning. They did not know that it is a sign of extreme urgency to wake up Americans at this hour. As one might expect, the American plant manager, who understood neither the local language nor the cul-