

# MULTIMODAL PRAGMATICS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

## Egyptian Multimodal Cues in English-mediated Interactions

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**Abstract** – This study explores the dynamics of multimodal communication in intercultural contexts, focusing on Egyptian users of English. Multimodal cues, such as gesture, eye contact, intonation, volume, and interpersonal distance, are culturally shaped, making cross-cultural communication prone to misunderstandings. Drawing on a multimodal pragmatic framework and a qualitative methodology based on Norris’s (2004a) Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis (MIA), the study examines a manually compiled corpus of YouTube videos featuring the Egyptian actor Bassem Youssef speaking English in anglophone environments. Specifically, through this case study, key para-linguistic and extra-linguistic resources are analysed to explore how Egyptian communicative style interacts with English-mediated discourse. The analysis investigates whether pragmatic transfer from Egyptian norms enhances communicative effectiveness or produces unintended impoliteness and challenges in cooperation. The case study’s findings offer empirical insight into culturally embedded Egyptian nonverbal practices in English interactions, highlighting the importance of cultural awareness in interpreting multimodal signals.

**Keywords:** communicative style; intercultural pragmatics; multimodal pragmatics; nonverbal communication; Egyptian English speakers.

## 1. Introduction

Communication is a dynamic process involving the interplay of verbal and nonverbal modes that jointly co-construct meaning in interaction (Balboni 2015; Kress, van Leeuwen 2001). As Norris (2004a) observes, “[a]ll interactions are multimodal” (p. 1), relying not only on linguistic resources but also on a wide range of paralinguistic (e.g., turn-taking, intonation, and rhythm) and extra-linguistic (e.g., gesture, gaze, facial expressions, body and head movement) semiotic resources. While language is often assumed to carry the most informative content, research demonstrates that para-linguistic and extra-linguistic modalities play equally crucial roles in meaning-making (see Indarti 2024; Kecskés 2014; Martinec 2000; Norris 2004a; O’Halloran *et al.* 2014; Payratò 2017).

However, decoding nonverbal meanings is not always immediate, even among interlocutors who share a linguistic and cultural background, and it becomes considerably more complex in intercultural interactions. As Kecskés (2014) argues, effective communication in such settings requires more than linguistic competence, including knowledge of vocabulary and grammar; it also demands intercultural pragmatic competencies, or the ability to interpret and produce culturally appropriate non-linguistic signals (see also Balboni 2006, 2015). He also observes that different speech communities often employ distinctive multimodal features to convey meanings, since these are deeply embedded in the speaker's native sociocultural background and pragmatic norms (see also Ting-Toomey 1999). When interlocutors do not share the same symbolic and cultural system, intercultural misinterpretations are likely to occur due to differences in values and socio-cultural norms, leading to miscommunication, pragmatic failure, or the perception of impoliteness (Abu-Arqoub and Alserhan 2019; Handriani *et al.* 2025; Mühleisen 2011). Even when English is used as a shared language and speakers use grammatically correct verbal elements, culturally rooted multimodal norms from a speaker's first language (L1) may influence interaction, potentially shaping communicative effectiveness (Kecskés 2014).

Through the illustrative case of the Egyptian actor and satirist Bassem Youssef, the present study investigates the multimodal practices of Egyptian users of English in English-mediated contexts. The main aim is to verify whether Egyptians' communicative style, widely characterised as expressive, animated, and high-contact (Nydell 2018), is transferred and may be misinterpreted in intercultural settings, without interlocutors' intercultural awareness or cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Adopting a multimodal pragmatic approach combined with Norris's (2004a, 2004b, 2011, 2020, 2021) Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis (MIA), this study examines a corpus of YouTube videos featuring Youssef communicating in English with English native speakers, in anglophone contexts (e.g., American or British interviews and podcasts). Focus is placed on multimodal cues – including some prosodic features, visual cues, interpersonal distance, eye contact, and touch – to investigate how Egyptians negotiate meaning in such English-mediated interactions. The resulting corpus is then qualitatively analysed to assess whether communication is pragmatically effective or whether the transfer of Egyptian norms results in misunderstanding or unintended social effects.

By documenting the Egyptian actor's nonverbal practices and offering empirical insights into how he negotiates meaning in English-mediated interactions, this investigation also wishes to contribute to the understanding of multimodal communication and intercultural pragmatics, reinforcing the theoretical integration of these two approaches.

## 2. Multimodal pragmatics in intercultural communication: State of the art

Multimodal pragmatics examines how language interacts with other non-linguistic communicative modes, including visual, gestural, auditory, and spatial modes, to serve pragmatic functions, such as co-constructing and reinforcing meaning, conveying intentions, managing politeness, and regulating turn-taking in interaction (O'Halloran *et al.* 2014; Payratò 2017). As Schroeder (2017) reports, the foundational relevance of multimodal communication was already recognised as early as classical antiquity, but only began to be systematically explored in the mid-twentieth century. Today, the literature is extensive, intersecting with multiple disciplines – such as social psychology, anthropology, semiotics, cognitive communication studies, sociolinguistics, and linguistic multimodal pragmatics – and encompassing key studies such as those by Bavelas (1990), Kendon (1967, 2004a), McNeill (1992, 2005), Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), O'Halloran *et al.* (2014), Payratò (2017), and Holler (2025), among others. However, early research primarily examined multimodal behaviours within a single culture and native-language contexts, leaving a notable gap in the intersection of multimodal and intercultural communication.

Still today, the exploration of how multimodal elements operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries remains in its early stages. Few investigations have explicitly examined how verbal and nonverbal modes interact in cross-cultural communication scenarios. Seminal contributions, such as Gumperz's ([1982] 2009) on prosody and gesture, and Tannen's ([1984] 2005) on conversational style, showed how intonation, rhythm, pitch, overlap, and gesture contribute to meaning and can generate misunderstanding among speakers from different cultural backgrounds. Hall's (1966, 1974, 1976) works on proxemics further highlighted that nonverbal behaviour is culturally embedded, rather than universal, a point widely supported by later research on intercultural communication. More recent studies, notably Kecskés (2014, 2022), link intercultural pragmatics with multimodality, underlining how pragmatic transfer from the L1 shapes both verbal and nonverbal behaviours in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), sometimes resulting in miscommunication. Parallel developments in multimodal pragmatics and interaction analysis (Norris 2004a, 2011, 2020) offer systematic frameworks for examining how gaze, gesture, prosody, and spatial orientation coordinate with spoken language to produce meaning in intercultural interactions.

Yet, despite such valuable contributions, studies explicitly bridging multimodal and intercultural pragmatics remain scarce. Moreover, most research focuses on native-language interactions or language-learning contexts (see Beltrán-Planques and Querol-Julián 2018; Gumperz [1982]

2009; Ishihara 2018; O'Halloran *et al.* 2014; Tannen [1984] 2005, among others). In contrast, there remains a relative lack of empirical investigation into how speakers employ prosodic and nonverbal cues when communicating in a non-native language (e.g., English as a Lingua Franca), in non-native, transnational settings (see Kecskés 2014, 2022; Lopriore and Grazi 2016). This gap is striking given English's global role as a medium of intercultural communication, especially in digital spaces. Being at the intersection of multimodal pragmatics and intercultural communication, and integrating insight from sociolinguistics, anthropology, cognitive psychology, social semiotics, and interactional discourse studies, the present study addresses this gap by empirically analysing how Egyptians use multimodal resources to negotiate meaning in English-mediated interactions, focusing on contexts such as online interviews and podcasts within anglophone cultural and linguistic settings.

### 3. Method

Egyptian communication is notably described as colourful, marked by emotionally nuanced tones, frequent hand gestures, animated facial expressions, strong eye contact, close interpersonal distance, and physical touch (Nydell 2018). These behaviours are culturally rooted and reflect broader social values such as warmth, hospitality, emotional engagement, and solidarity (Feghali 1997; Nydell 2018). However, while culturally normative within Egypt, such behaviours may be misread and perceived as overly assertive, inappropriate, or even disrespectful when displayed in intercultural contexts, sometimes resulting “in misunderstanding, leaving both parties feeling bewildered or deceived” (Nydell 2018, p. 93).

Because nonverbal communication is culturally specific (see Section 1), the expectation is that Egyptians continue to exhibit these patterns in English interactions. Even with high fluency, their communicative style may blend global, English-mediated verbal forms with local nonverbal practices. The resulting English expressive communication style may diverge from the pragmatic expectations of English-speaking interlocutors, especially those from cultures prioritising verbal restraint and minimal nonverbal display. To investigate these dynamics, this study explores Egyptian users of English in cross-cultural settings beyond Egypt, an underexplored area. While previous research has documented Egyptian nonverbal practices in Arabic-speaking environments (see Adly 2021; Eladawy 2021; Feghali 1997; Hafez 1991; Nydell 2018; Raddawi 2015; Zaharna 1995, among others), few or no studies address how these practices persist in English-mediated, anglophone settings. The research adopts a multimodal pragmatic approach combined with video-based qualitative analysis, building on Norris's (2004a, 2004b, 2011, 2020,

2021) MIA. The corpus was manually compiled from publicly available videos on YouTube, which integrate audio, visual, and textual data and enable detailed multimodal transcription and analysis of how verbal and nonverbal modes interact (Norris 2019; Haryanti *et al.* 2023). The selection process yielded twenty-one videos. Criteria primarily included the presence of fluent Egyptian English speakers interacting with native English interlocutors; semi-formal settings such as interviews, debates, or podcasts; face-to-face interaction (even though mediated by microphones); and clear visibility of the speaker's upper body to allow observation of gestures, body movement, facial expressions, and proxemics. The resulting corpus prominently features interviews with public figures, mainly actors and writers. Out of the twenty-one videos, seven were chosen for this analysis, consisting exclusively of interviews with Bassem Youssef, whose frequent use of paralinguistic and extralinguistic cues typical of Egyptian speakers, high fluency in English, and frequent participation in English-language (mainly American) shows and podcasts provide a rich and illustrative case-study for examining the persistence of Egyptian pragmatic norms in intercultural settings.

Data were analysed through repeated observation, including slow-motion viewing, and manual transcription in Word. Multimodal transcription conventions (Norris 2004a, 2011, 2019, 2020) were employed, integrating verbal utterances with paralinguistic and nonverbal signals. In addition, snapshots were extracted to document gestures, body movement, and interpersonal distance. Specifically, the analysis focused on six of Andersen's (2010) eight nonverbal codes: chronemics (turn-taking, rhythm), vocalics (prosody, intonation, volume), kinesics (body motion, gestures, facial expressions), proxemics (interpersonal distance), haptics (touch), and oculosics (eye contact). Physical appearance (gender, height, weight, skin colour, body shape, and artifacts) and olfactics (smell) were excluded, as they were not deemed relevant or applicable to the aims of this research. The primary aim was to identify patterns of pragmatic transfer and trace how Egyptian norms influence English communication. Particular attention was given to instances of miscommunication, difficulties with cooperation, perceptions of impoliteness, or unintended offence, which can make intercultural communication ineffective or pragmatically unsuccessful.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Para-linguistic features

#### 4.1.1. Turn-taking, rhythm, intonation, and volume

Chronemics and vocalics – including turn-taking, speech tempo, intonation, and volume – are culture-specific conversational resources (Balboni 2006; Stivers *et al.* 2009). While English-speaking cultures generally privilege orderly sequencing, Egyptian interactional norms value immediacy, involvement, and expressive intensity (Nydell 2018). Such contrasts often generate tension and misunderstanding in intercultural exchanges (Balboni 2006).

Although similarities between Arabic and English have been detected (Ali Aldhahri 2024), in many English-speaking settings, turn-taking typically follows a one-at-a-time model, where a speaker holds the floor until yielding it (Sacks *et al.* 1974; Hall 1976). In such a context, overlaps are usually interpreted as interruptions (Hafez 1991). By contrast, Egyptian and broader Arab cultures align more closely with an all-in-together model. As Nydell (2018) observes, Arab discussions are often animated, with “several people speak[ing] at once (each trying to outshout the other), interspersing their statements with gestures” (p. 93). In this context, simultaneous talk and overlaps function as signals of enthusiasm, solidarity, and engagement.

Rhythm, intonation, and volume further mark these cultural differences (Couper-Kuhlen 2001; Wennerstrom 2001). Egyptians often speak at a rapid pace, using emphatic intonation (Chahal and Hillmuth 2014; Yousri 2017) and raised volume to convey passion, sincerity, and urgency (Feghali 1997; Nydell 2018). This energetic delivery encourages quicker turn transitions and frequent overlap. In contrast, English-speaking interlocutors typically prefer slower rhythm, evenly timed speech, and falling intonation to mark turn completion (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Wennerstrom 2001). Consequently, what Egyptians view as involvement and expressiveness may be perceived as impatience and aggression in English-speaking contexts.

An illustrative exchange, coming from Youssef’s interviews with British journalist Piers Morgan on the talk show *Piers Morgan Uncensored*, is reported below:

- |     |      |                 |   |
|-----|------|-----------------|---|
| (1) | 9:04 | <i>Youssef:</i> | So, I I I told you. He’s a loser  |
| (2) |      |                 | He never kept a job   |
| (3) |      |                 | He even like failed in all of the interviews  |
| (4) |      |                 | to become like a human shield   |
| (5) |      |                 | I I I would believe   |
| (6) | 9:12 | <i>Morgan:</i>  | I – Let me ask you this question ↓<br>SO, LET’S GO WITH THAT ↑ (extending his hand in front<br>of his interlocutor, fingers spread)<br>NO NO NO (fast), LET’S GO, LET ME ASK YOU ↑ (pointing his left index |
| (7) |      | <i>Youssef</i>  |   |
| (8) |      |                 |   |

			towards the interlocutor)
(9)	9:16	Morgan:	{ At some point I must be able to ask you questions ↓ IF WE, IF WE ↑ It's not [?] for you Bassem ↓ IF WE AGREE, if we agree (pinching his fingers together, both hands shaking up and down) If we agree that the 14,000 casualties I mean who's counting [...] (spreading his fingers)
(10)	9:17	Youssef:	
(11)		Morgan:	
(12)	9:20	Youssef:	
(13)			
(14)			

In the exchange, Youssef frequently overlaps and interrupts (lines 6 to 12), displays animated rising intonation (lines 7 and 8), fast rhythm (line 8), high volume (lines 7, 8, 10, 12), and emphatic gestures, to secure turn-holding. While for him, these features appear to signal emotional involvement, Morgan interprets them as interruptions and “an invasion of linguistic space” (Balboni 2006, p. 27). In fact, irritated, he attempts to manage turn order (line 9), but eventually, unable to regain control, leaves Youssef to dominate the interaction. His irritation highlights a clash between Egyptian and (British) English pragmatic norms and illustrates how differing expectations regarding overlap, tempo, intonation, and volume can shape perceptions of power and politeness. In such contexts, intercultural communication requires recognising that these practices are not necessarily signs of disrespect but expressions of distinct cultural preferences for conversational flow (Scollon *et al.* 2012; Spencer-Oatey 2008).

## 4.2. Extra-linguistic features

### 4.2.1. ‘Pragmatic gestures’, interpersonal distance, and touch

Body language, often more spontaneous and less controlled than verbal expression, plays a crucial role in face-to-face interaction (Balboni 2006; Birdwhistell 1952; Hall 1976; Morris 1977). Speakers enrich or even override verbal messages through kinesics – gestures, posture, facial expressions, proxemics, and touch (Birdwhistell 1952, 1970; Martinec 2000; van Leeuwen 2004). Yet because these behaviours are culturally embedded, they are particularly vulnerable to cross-cultural misinterpretation (Balboni 2006): actions intended as humorous, emphatic, or engaging in one culture may be read as excessive, rude, or inappropriate in another.

As Samovar *et al.* (2013) and Nydell (2018) observe, Egyptian communicative style is ‘gesture-rich’ (Iverson *et al.* 2008; see also Graziano and Gulberg 2024; Kendon 2004a), characterised by marked bodily expressiveness, especially among men and less-educated speakers, whose open gestures and dynamic movements generally signal warmth, humour, and emotional engagement. This performative style is exemplified by Youssef, who often adopts a highly physical, dynamic, and heavily dramatised manner of storytelling. In his second interview with Morgan on *Talk TV*, Youssef

recounts a joke while discussing the conflict in the Middle East, accompanying almost every utterance with expansive gestures, facial mimicry, and shifts in posture, synchronically with speech (Bavelas 1990; Bavelas, Gerwing 2007) (Figure 1):

- |      |                                      |                                   |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
|------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|------------|
| (1)  | 1:31:02                              | <i>Youssef:</i>                   | There was   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (2)  | 1:31:03                              | <i>Morgan:</i><br><i>Youssef:</i> | <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="font-size: 3em; vertical-align: middle;">{</td> <td>there</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>it's completely wrong ↓</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>THERE is ↑</td> </tr> </table> | { | there                            |  | it's completely wrong ↓              |  | THERE is ↑ |
| {    | there                                |                                   |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
|      | it's completely wrong ↓              |                                   |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
|      | THERE is ↑                           |                                   |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (3)  |                                      |                                   | a hilarious (leaning towards Morgan, right hand raised with palm facing inwards, fingers slightly spread, then retreating)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (4)  |                                      |                                   | documentary called <i>The Wanted 18</i> [...] (leaning in again)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (5)  |                                      |                                   | So, they bought 18 cows (0.1) (moving his hand, palm facing downwards, from far to near)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (6)  |                                      |                                   | 18 cows (0.1) (pointing upwards with his index, thumb spread, smiling ironically)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (7)  |                                      |                                   | and (0.1) they didn't know how to milk the cows   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (8)  |                                      |                                   | or have a cow farm [...] (rotating his torso side to side, hands raised, palms facing inwards, smiling ironically)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (9)  |                                      |                                   | So they brought the cows (extending his arms forwards, then retreating them to his chest, palms facing inwards)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (10) |                                      |                                   | and they started to produce milk (clenching his fists, and moving his hands up and down, wide-eyed, smiling ironically)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (11) |                                      |                                   | and they started (moving his left arm from his chest outwards, palm facing upwards, shaking up and down)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (12) |                                      |                                   | to sell the milk to the villages (moving his arm in a semicircle, left to right, smiling ironically)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (13) |                                      |                                   | The Israeli authorities (leaning his head on his left hand)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (14) |                                      |                                   | were not very comfortable (scratching and touching his chin, gazing at his interlocutor, smiling ironically)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (15) |                                      |                                   | So one day (pointing at Morgan with his right index)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (16) |                                      |                                   | the military government came in and said  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (17) |                                      |                                   | 'Those cows,' and I quote (pointing up with his right index, rapidly touching his nose, smiling ironically)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (18) |                                      |                                   | "constitutes an existential threat to the national security of the state of Israel,   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (19) |                                      |                                   | you need to get rid of them" (moving his left hand up and down, pointing)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (20) |                                      |                                   | And the movie goes (leaning his head backwards, head tilted back, then forwards)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (21) |                                      |                                   | about the hilarious (touching his head with both hands)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (22) |                                      |                                   | attempts of hiding those cows (shaking his arms, fingers spread, smiling ironically)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (23) |                                      |                                   | between the butchers and the houses.  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (24) |                                      |                                   | And in one scene (pointing at Morgan with his right index)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (25) |                                      |                                   | a cow is actually running (extending his right arm out and upwards)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (26) |                                      |                                   | and the Israeli soldiers are running behind it (raising his hands, open-palmed, fingers claw-like, wide-eyed, smiling ironically)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (27) |                                      |                                   | And they CORNER it, and they CORNER it ↑ (leaning towards Morgan)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (28) |                                      |                                   | and they're about to KILL it ↓  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (29) | 1:32:09                              | <i>Morgan:</i><br><i>Youssef:</i> | (silence, both Youssef and Morgan stare at each other) (0.3)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (30) | 1:32:12                              | <i>Youssef:</i>                   | You didn't fall for this. Cows don't speak ↓ (leaning towards Morgan, gazing at him, and shaking his hand, while smiling ironically)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (31) |                                      |                                   | YEEEEAAAAAH ↑ (leaning backwards, head tilted back)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (32) | 1:32:14                              | <i>Morgan:</i>                    | (smiling, shocked in humorous disbelief, mouth half-opened)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (33) | 1:32:15                              | <i>Youssef:</i>                   | but you know? ↑ (pointing at Morgan with his left index)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (34) |                                      |                                   | It actually said something. ↓   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (35) |                                      |                                   | You know what did it say? ↑ (leaning towards Morgan)  |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (36) |                                      |                                   | It said 'moooooooooooooo!!'   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (37) |                                      |                                   | <table border="0"> <tr> <td style="font-size: 3em; vertical-align: middle;">{</td> <td>but anyway! (leaning back again)</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Ah Ah (laughing, still in disbelief)</td> </tr> </table>  | { | but anyway! (leaning back again) |  | Ah Ah (laughing, still in disbelief) |  |            |
| {    | but anyway! (leaning back again)     |                                   |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
|      | Ah Ah (laughing, still in disbelief) |                                   |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (38) | 1:32:18                              | <i>Morgan:</i>                    |   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |
| (39) |                                      | <i>Youssef:</i>                   | AH AH AH (laughing heartily, mouth wide open, head tilted back)   |   |                                  |  |                                      |  |            |



Figure 1  
Snapshot from *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2 | Two-Hour Special Interview*, showing Youssef’s facial expressions, body movement, and gestures while delivering a joke. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt_M).

In this example, Youssef employs ‘pragmatic gestures’ (Kendon 1995, 2004a), also referred to as ‘conversational gestures’ (Bavelas 1990; Bavelas

and Gerwing 2007) or ‘recurrent gestures’ (Ladewig 2024), which are largely universally intelligible and shared, to animate the narrative and reinforce meaning (Kendon 2004a). Specifically, he performs iconic gestures to visualise the narrative, deictic gestures to indicate directions, and metaphoric gestures to represent abstract ideas (McNeill 1992, 2005; Norris 2004a). For instance, he enacts the milking motions (line 10 and Figure 1, fifth scene), sweeping arm gestures to describe the distribution of milk (line 12 and Figure 1, sixth scene), and frantic movements to mimic hiding (line 22 and Figure 1, seventh scene) and chase (line 25 and Figure 1, eighth scene). Such ‘representative actions’ (Martinec 2000) visually illustrate the story, amplifying its comedic and dramatic tones and heightening its absurdity. Beat gestures (McNeill 1992, 2005), or ‘indexical actions’ (Martinec 2000) (see line 19), further punctuate his speech, reinforcing rhythm and emphasis. This animated bodily delivery may sometimes be perceived as entertaining, charismatic, and persuasive, even when culturally incongruent. However, it can also appear excessive and impolite to an interlocutor like Morgan, from a ‘gesture-poor’ culture (Iverson *et al.* 2008; see also Graziano and Gulberg 2024; Kendon 2004a) that values restraint, and where movement intensity may be misread as aggression, mockery, or loss of self-control (Hall 1976; Knapp *et al.* 2014; Nydell 2018; Remland 2009).

In addition to gestures, Youssef frequently leans forward, narrowing the physical distance between himself and Morgan, occasionally resorting to touch. According to Hall (1959), proxemics may be sociofugal (discouraging closeness) or sociopetal (promoting closeness). While British and other anglophone cultures typically adopt a sociofugal orientation, requiring greater interpersonal distance, often five feet or more (Feghali 1997), Egyptians tend towards sociopetal arrangements (Hall 1959; Nydell 2018), feeling comfortable at two feet or less (Feghali 1997; Balboni 2006), and being even contact-oriented (Busà *et al.* 2023). Consequently, proximity and touch that signal friendliness in Egyptian culture may be perceived as an aggressive and impolite invasion of personal space (Feghali 1997) in British contexts. This cultural divergence is evident at the climax of Youssef’s joke (lines 28-39), when he suddenly leans in and shakes Morgan’s hand (line 30). While intended as a sign of involvement and solidarity (Hall 1959; Nydell 2018), Morgan’s stiff, motionless response betrays discomfort. His unease is even clearer in another moment of the interview (minutes 1:16:24-1:16:27), where he subtly leans his head back as Youssef intrusively moves closer, giving the impression of feeling annoyed or even threatened (Figure 2).



Figure 2

Snapshot from *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2 | Two-Hour Special Interview*, showing Youssef leaning towards the interviewer, who slightly retreats.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt_M).

#### 4.2.2. Facial expression and gaze

The face – the eyebrows, mouth, and gaze direction in particular (Holler 2025) – constitutes one of the most powerful communicative channels, often conveying emotions (Ekman and Friesen 1971; Haller and Rambaud 1987), “communicating intentions and [...] facilitat[ing] pragmatically appropriate responding” (Holler 2025, p. 750).

However, facial signals are culturally specific (Holler 2025) and may lead to misinterpretations in intercultural encounters. In Youssef’s performance (Figure 2), shifts in eyebrow position, ironic smiles, and bursts of open laughter accompany his narrative, reinforcing its playful and satirical tone. Yet this very intensity risks clashing with the British interviewer’s expectations of politeness. In a British communicative framework, indeed, exaggerated expressions and loud laughter may appear overwhelming, placing the interlocutor in a passive role or even an uncomfortable position. Morgan’s restrained responses, limited to subtle eyebrow raises and a half-smile with the corners of his mouth drawn back (Figure 1, tenth scene), signal this contrast. His minimal expressiveness illustrates polite acknowledgement but also suggests unease, mock surprise, or failure to fully share Youssef’s humour. This juxtaposition not only underscores cultural divergence in facial expressiveness but also reveals moments of nonverbal misalignment that may generate embarrassment or impressions of impoliteness.

Eye behaviour, or oculusics (Andersen 2010), provides another key layer of interaction. Gaze regulates turn-taking, offers feedback, and conveys emotions (Argyle and Cool 1976; Ekman and Friesen 1971; Goodwin 1981; Kendon 1967). While universal in functions, its use is strongly culture-specific (Busà *et al.* 2023). For example, Egyptians, like other Arabs, often sustain prolonged eye contact as a sign of sincerity and attentiveness (Balboni 2006). However, outsiders may perceive such intensity as intrusive staring or even as a claim to dominance (Samovar *et al.* 2013). Such mismatches may

cause discomfort or even conflict in intercultural exchanges. In the second interview with Morgan, Youssef repeatedly fixes his gaze on his interlocutor for extended periods, sometimes lasting over ten seconds. In one striking instance (minutes 32:31-32:4), he maintains direct eye contact with widened eyes (Figure 3), producing a stare that may be read as emphatic and engaging in his cultural frame, but potentially unsettling in Morgan's.



Figure 3

Snapshot from *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2 | Two-Hour Special Interview*, showing Youssef staring at his interlocutor, wide-eyed.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt_M).

#### 4.2.3. A focus on 'emblematic gestures'

As seen in Section 4.2.1, Youssef employs a wide repertoire of gestures – pointing, mimicking, special framing – to animate his arguments. Beyond these 'pragmatic gestures' (Kendon 1995, 2004a), he frequently performs 'emblematic gestures' (Kendon 1995, 2004a), whose meanings are conventional and culturally agreed-upon (Abner *et al.* 2015; Archer 1997; Birdwhistell 1970; Kecskés 2014; Kendon 1995, 2004a; Nydell 2018; Samovar *et. al* 2013), differing drastically across cultures (Cooperrider 2020). As a result, these gestures often generate misconstructions, misinterpretations, and even unintended offense.

The purse-hand gesture (Kendon 1995) is perhaps the most recognisable and emblematic among Egyptian gestures. In this movement, fingers are pinched together and the hand(s) move(s) slowly up and down (Figure 4). It usually signals "wait", "slow down", or "relax", though, depending on speed and accompanying expression, it can also convey impatience or a veiled threat. In an interview with the Canadian-American *The Nelk Boys*, Youssef performs this gesture repeatedly, adapting its meaning to context.

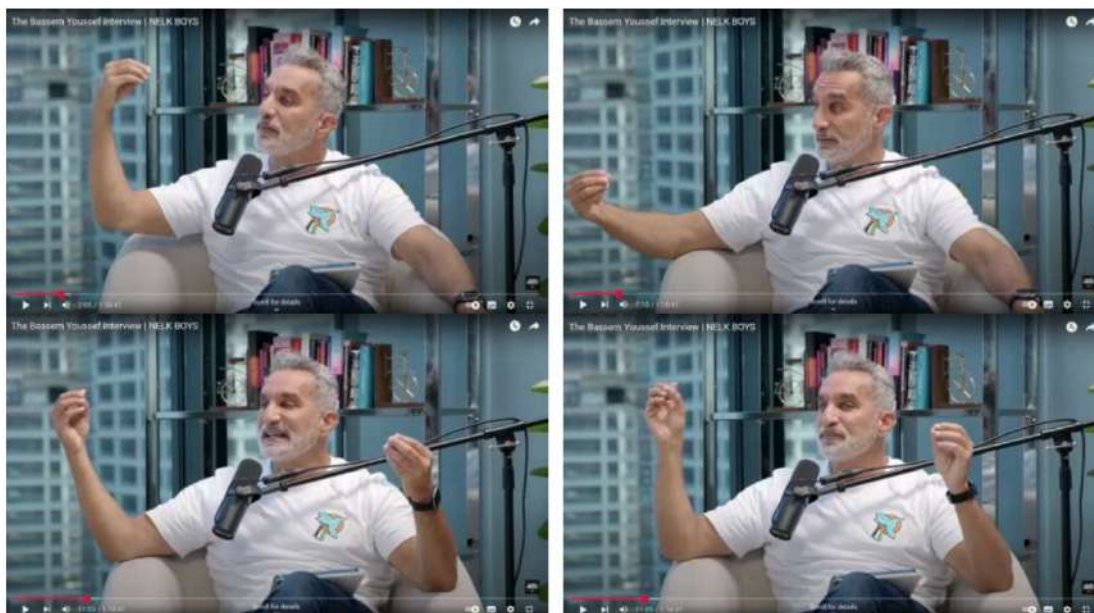


Figure 4

Snapshot from *The Bassem Youssef Interview | NELK BOYS*, showing Youssef making the purse-hand gesture.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GW-yaLz-3OE>.

At times, this ‘indexical action’ (Martinec 2000) expresses questioning and pleading for understanding. For example, in the first two scenes in Figure 4, Youssef performs this gesture while uttering the following words:

- |      |      |                 |  |
|------|------|-----------------|--|
| (1)  | 6:50 | <i>Youssef:</i> | You’re thirty years old and you need to be aware (extending his right hand towards the two interlocutors, fingers cupped together) |
| (2)  |      |                 | of what’s happening in the world (raising his left hand, fingers cupped, both hands swinging up and down, eyebrow raised)          |
| (3)  |      |                 | and that you reach   |
| (4)  |      |                 | and your platforms mean something  |
| (5)  |      |                 | and it affects people.   |
| (6)  |      |                 | And I think the biggest reason (rotating palms downwards, hands swinging up and down)  |
| (7)  |      |                 | why people are so upset for you,   |
| (8)  |      |                 | not because you brought someone (spreading his arms outwards to left and right, fingers still cupped together)                     |
| (9)  |      |                 | And you didn’t contest him   |
| (10) |      |                 | But that it is the talking point that he used (relaxing his left arm, swinging his right hand with fingers still cupped together)  |
| (11) |      |                 | is the same talking points that have been used for two years   |
| (12) |      |                 | to kill thousands of people. Right?  |

The tag question at the end (line 12) and the raised eyebrow (line 2 and Figure 4, second scene) confirm and reinforce the questioning nature of Youssef’s discourse and his plea for understanding. At other times, the same gesture conveys frustration and irritation, as in his first interview with Morgan (see example in Section 4.1.1, line 12), where, exasperated by interruptions, he uses it while struggling to retain the floor. In other contexts, the gesture carries moral weight. During the *Nelk Boys* interview (Figure 4,

third and fourth scenes), Youssef employs it to underline the absurdity of racist tropes:

- |      |       |                 |  |
|------|-------|-----------------|--|
| (1)  | 10:52 | <i>Youssef:</i> | I don't know who edited  |
| (2)  |       |                 | that.. if..<br>it seems that<br>Mousad edited it   |
| (3)  |       |                 | but if you guys edited,  |
| (4)  |       |                 | that is fucked up (raising his left hand, palm facing downwards, swinging up and down)                             |
| (5)  |       |                 | because it (rotating his left hand, palm facing inwards)<br>just.. j.. just  |
| (7)  |       |                 | like it.. (spreading his fingers)  |
| (8)  |       |                 | solidifies (raising his right hand cupped, hands slowly swinging up and down, the corners of his mouth drawn down) |
| (9)  |       |                 | the same racist tropes   |
| (10) |       |                 | about a group of people  |
| (11) |       |                 | that being slaughtered and starved to death right now  |
| (12) |       |                 | and then, they distract you with questions like ( . ) (spreading his fingers again, hands semi-cupped)             |
| (13) |       |                 | it is Hamas! (spreading arms and hands outwards to left and right, fingers widely spread)                          |

Here, the movement highlights the gravity of his words, pointing to justice and challenging the interlocutor's (or the editors') perspective. Its force is amplified by Youssef's facial expression, featuring the corners of his mouth drawn down in visible irritation (line 8, and Figure 4, third scene). The gesture can also take on lighter tones. At the *India Today Conclave 2024*, for instance, Youssef uses it when saying "I'm very very pleased to be here!" to emphasise enthusiasm and amplify the meaning of words. However, across these examples, since the gesture is unfamiliar to Canadian-American or Indian contexts, it fails to carry its intended weight, losing both semantic resonance and pragmatic effects.

A second local Egyptian hand gesture is the 'what's going on?', made by twisting the wrist clockwise and anticlockwise with the palm facing down. It generally conveys confusion, outrage, or concern. During his speech at *India Today Conclave 2024*, Youssef uses this gesture (Figure 5) to denounce Israeli propaganda during the war in Gaza:

- |     |       |                 |   |
|-----|-------|-----------------|---|
| (1) | 12:33 | <i>Youssef:</i> | They did it through lies (pointing downwards with his left index)             |
| (2) |       |                 | propaganda (twisting his right wrist clockwise and anticlockwise)             |
| (3) |       |                 | twisting facts  |
| (4) |       |                 | and emotional blackmail (twisting his left wrist clockwise and anticlockwise) |



Figure 5  
 Snapshot from *India Today Conclave 2024: Viral from Israel-Gaza War Stinging Comic Commentary by Egyptian Comedian*, showing Youssef performing a twisting-hand gesture. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_04qco8OjkY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_04qco8OjkY).

However, in anglophone contexts, including India, this gesture’s meaning is opaque, risking pragmatic failure; like the ‘be patient’ movement, it may be read as a mere filler rather than an appeal for moral urgency.

Some gestures share identical hand movements across cultures but carry divergent meanings, making them particularly prone to confusion in intercultural contexts. One instance of a hand gesture that is not unique to Egyptian culture, yet has an exclusive meaning in Egypt, is the emphatic ‘I swear to God’, where the thumb and forefinger form a circle. In Western cultures, it is positively connotated, signalling “okay”; in Egypt, instead, it carries hostile, sometimes threatening undertones, often intensified with a baring of teeth (Samovar *et al.* 2013). This gesture recurs frequently in Youssef’s speeches, as shown in the snapshot from the *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2* video (Figure 6). In this instance, it accompanies his reference to the Holocaust, presented as the most horrible genocide in modern history:

- |     |       |                 |  |
|-----|-------|-----------------|--|
| (1) | 46:10 | <i>Youssef:</i> | As you see (extending his arms towards his interlocutor, palms facing inwards, teeth bared)        |
| (2) |       |                 | the Holocaust happened (retreating his arms)   |
| (3) |       |                 | the most   |
| (4) |       |                 | orchestrated industrialised (joining his thumb and forefinger in a circle, other fingers extended) |
| (5) |       |                 | horrible genocide (moving his left arm up and down, fingers still connected)                       |
| (6) |       |                 | in our modern time (spreading his fingers, palm facing downwards)                                  |



Figure 6

Snapshot from *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2 | Two-Hour Special Interview*, showing Youssef with bared teeth, performing a “I swear to God” threatening gesture.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt_M).

If isolated from facial expression and verbal context, the gesture’s meaning risks being inverted; what Youssef intends as anger or disapproval may be read by the British journalist as reassurance, consent, or positivity, heightening the chance of misinterpretation.

Similarly, the rotating index finger near the temple in Egypt means ‘think about it!’ or “use your head”, but in many Western English-speaking contexts, it is read as “are you crazy?”, an almost opposite meaning. In one instance from the same *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2* video, Youssef uses this metaphorical gesture (Figure 7), while citing the reflections of an Israeli historian, arguing that many Israelis lack a real concept of peace due to the persistent war in their territory:

- |      |       |                 |   |
|------|-------|-----------------|---|
| (1)  | 58:16 | <i>Youssef:</i> | { There is a boo – (extending his right arm, fingers cupped)<br>I know you would say most of his cabinet<br>The.. the.. (fast)  |
| (2)  | 58:17 | <i>Morgan:</i>  |   |
| (3)  | 58:19 | <i>Youssef:</i> |   |
| (4)  |       |                 | there is a book called <i>The Fear of Peace</i> , (touching his chin)   |
| (5)  |       |                 | it’s called by Moshe Zimmermann (holding his throat area)   |
| (6)  |       |                 | an Israeli historian (extending his right arm towards his interlocutor, palm facing downwards)  |
| (7)  |       |                 | and he said like (slightly retreating his hand, fingers claw-like)  |
| (8)  |       |                 | the average Israeli citizen (swinging his hand up and down)   |
| (9)  |       |                 | does not have a vision of Peace   |
| (10) |       |                 | because for seventy years this is a country (shaking his head side to side)   |
| (11) |       |                 | that has been the military ( . )  |
| (12) |       |                 | war has been going on for long [...] (raising his right hand, moving it back and forward, fingers held close together. Gazing at his interlocutor, wide-eyed, and smiling ironically) |
| (13) |       |                 | So the whole idea of peace (rotating his right index finger near his temple)  |
| (14) |       |                 | is not even there (slightly getting up from the chair, still rotating his finger)   |



Figure 7

Snapshot from *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2 | Two-Hour Special Interview*, showing Youssef performing a ‘thinking’ gesture.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt_M).

In this instance, Youssef associates the movement with the act of thinking or envisioning. However, while Youssef uses it in a descriptive, non-judgmental way, the British interlocutor may misread it as highlighting the absurdity of the idea.

Notably, in other moments of the same video, Youssef resorts to the Egyptian equivalent of ‘are you crazy?’ by pointing both index fingers to the sides of his head. While in anglophone cultures, this same configuration is used to convey that a person is thinking hard and using their brain, emphasising intelligence and concentration, in contrast, in Egypt, it is often used in debates or animated conversations to urge interlocutors to think logically, recall something important, or reconsider facts and their position carefully. In the instance in Figure 8, Youssef performs this gesture to mark his interlocutor’s reasoning as irrational and foolish, accompanying his words that denounce the unreasonable act of killing Israelis:

- |     |         |                 |   |
|-----|---------|-----------------|---|
| (1) | 1:21:28 | <i>Youssef:</i> | The only two crutches that (rotating his hands, index and thumb pinched, palms facing inwards)  |
| (2) |         |                 | that that is is like Abdullah (extending his arm to the right, palm facing downward, fingers spread).   |
| (3) |         |                 | and Hamas (raising both hands at chest level, fingers spread and slightly curved downwards)   |
| (4) |         |                 | A few militant  |
| (5) |         |                 | Thousands of militant (rotating his palms upwards, fingers spread)  |
| (6) |         |                 | is is that really formed an existential (rotating his palms downwards again, fingers spread and slightly curved)                              |
| (7) |         |                 | like a threat especially (relaxing his right arm, raising his left hand to his temple, fingers touching the side of his head, brows furrowed) |

- (8) If I know that over 13 years (pointing and pressing both index fingers to temples, furrowed brows)
- (9) Only.. not not.. 69 Israelis were killed?



Figure 8

Snapshot from *Piers Morgan vs Bassem Youssef Round 2 | Two-Hour Special Interview* showing Youssef performing the ‘are you crazy?’ gesture.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqjO5Z9Lt_M).

This message is reinforced by his facial expression, which reveals indignation. His eyebrows are drawn inward and downward, his eyes are slightly narrowed, conveying scrutiny, and his lips are pressed together and slightly pulled down at the corners to signal strong disapproval (Figure 8). However, without accompanying verbal or facial cues, the British interlocutor might interpret the gesture differently, associating it with deep thought and positivity rather than disapproval. These examples illustrate how intercultural encounters are sites of indexical reversibility, where identical forms can convey opposite meanings across boundaries (Kendon 2004a), meanwhile corroborating Holler’s (2025) idea that facial signals “significantly improve participants’ accuracy” (p. 753) in distinguishing their pragmatic intentions.

Yet, while these gestures may produce ambiguous meanings and potential misinterpretations, others even carry the risk of face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987), potentially causing offense (Spencer-Oatey 2008). For example, in his interactions with Morgan, the American podcaster Lex Friedman and the British-American broadcaster and writer Mehdi Hasan, Youssef frequently touches his chin, face, or neck (see example in Section 4.2.1., lines 13 and 21), caresses and scratches his beard, leans his head on his hand (Figure 9), or points at his interlocutor(s) (Figure 10).



Figure 9

Snapshot from *Bassem Youssef: Israel-Palestine, Gaza, Hamas, Middle East, Satire & Fame | Lex Fridman Podcast #424*, showing Youssef resting his head on his hand during the debate. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG8u6owzad4>.

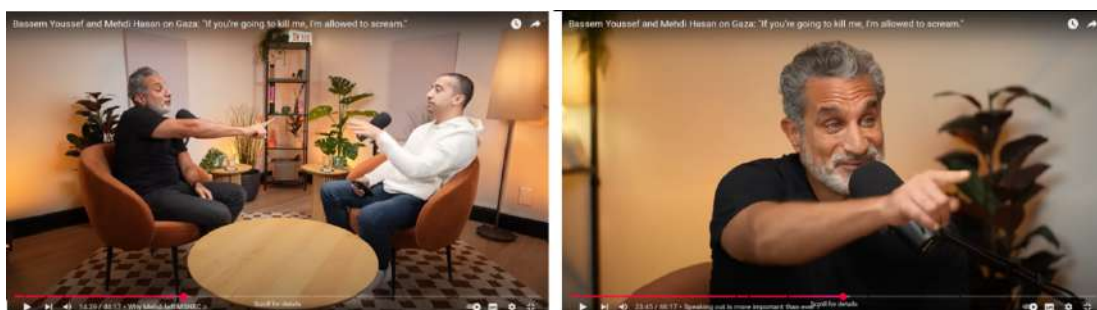


Figure 10

Snapshot from *Bassem Youssef and Mehdi Hasan on Gaza: "If you're going to kill me, I'm allowed to scream."*, showing Youssef pointing at his interlocutor. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTWmL1HfEs>.

In the Egyptian communicative context, these gestures commonly signal stress, concern, reflective attention, or evaluative thought. However, British or Anglo-American interlocutors may interpret them as signs of distraction, disinterest, and boredom, giving rise to perceptions of impoliteness and disrespect. Similarly, Youssef's pointing gestures, intended to direct attention and coordinate interaction (Kendon 2004b), may be perceived as aggressive or accusatory, creating the impression of personal attack.

## 5. Discussion

By observing Youssef's performances in English-mediated discourses on YouTube, the present analysis offers empirical insight into culturally embedded Egyptian nonverbal practices in cross-cultural contexts. Specifically, it shows that Youssef's L1 multimodal features continue framing meaning and shaping interaction in anglophone contexts, potentially leading to pragmatic variability. The transfer of culturally embedded

multimodal norms sometimes seems to enhance communication, adding vividness to the interaction, but other times, it appears to clash with interlocutors' expectations, leading to misunderstanding, unintended impoliteness, or even offense (Busà *et al.* 2023; Hall 1959; Scollon *et al.* 2012; Spencer-Oatey 2008). This supports Kecskés' (2014) model of intercultural pragmatics, which views communication as a negotiation between L1 and L2 (or the foreign language) pragmatic systems rather than a complete shift from one to the other. Youssef's communicative repertoire – including intrusive overlap, emphatic volume, fast rhythm, animated gestures, dynamic body movement, short interpersonal distance, touch, communicative facial expressions, and strong and prolonged eye contact – seems to reflect Egyptian cultural values of sociability, immediacy, warmth, and involvement, especially under emotional engagement (Samovar *et al.* 2013; Nydell 2018). However, while common in Egyptian contexts (Nydell 2018), these norms may be perceived as excessive, assertive, or inappropriate when filtered through more restrained and sociofugal conventions (Hall 1959; Feghali 1997), potentially generating discomfort, embarrassment, and a perception of impoliteness. A major focus in the analysis is on 'emblematic gestures' (Kendon 1995, 2004a) and on those that, while formally identical, may be decoded differently across cultures. Findings indicate that such cases, including the purse-hand or twisting-wrist movement, do not guarantee cross-cultural intelligibility. They may be meaningless in anglophone contexts, produce divergent connotations, or sometimes even develop unintended or hostile undertones, resulting in pragmatic breakdowns, confusion, or inadvertent face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Overall, these findings reaffirm the cultural relativity of nonverbal systems of meaning and support the idea that chronemics, vocalics, kinesics, proxemics, oculosics, and haptics are not universal but culturally encoded and decoded differently across contexts (Andersen 2010).

## 6. Conclusion

Through the illustrative case of the Egyptian actor Bassem Youssef's multimodal communicative style in anglophone settings, this study emphasises the cultural specificity of prosodic and nonverbal behaviours and their potential impact on intercultural communication outcomes. It suggests that when these behaviours are not shared, carry different meanings across cultures, or occur between speakers with differing communicative styles (e.g., gesture-rich vs gesture-poor), pragmatic failure may arise. The findings thus would confirm that effective intercultural communication relies not only on linguistic competence but also on the ability to interpret and manage multimodal signals.

By doing so, this research contributes to the study of multimodal interaction in intercultural communication, affirming the value of integrating multimodality and intercultural pragmatics approaches. Beyond its descriptive contribution, the study also highlights an important intercultural implication. In line with Gudykunst (2004) and Holliday (2011), it emphasises that effective communication requires sensitivity to how multimodal cues are produced and received across cultures. It emphasises the need to recognise that what appears as assertiveness, intrusion, or excessive expressivity in one culture may function as warmth, immediacy, or solidarity in another. Cultural awareness of such differences, therefore, becomes important for interpreting multimodal signals and can reduce negative stereotyping and misattribution of intention, fostering empathy and greater tolerance towards communicative diversity. In this sense, this study contributes to the broader discussion of intercultural competence.

Nevertheless, although providing valuable insights, this study has some limitations. First, it is constrained to the single case of Youssef. Second, although overly formal interviews were excluded, the analysed discourses still stem from settings where both language and nonverbal behaviour are to some extent regulated. Additionally, the dataset is drawn from interviews with a comedian, which are inevitably performative. To address these limitations, future research should broaden the corpus by including a wider range of Egyptian speakers, also considering the internal socio-cultural diversity of the population. It should also extend the analysis to more spontaneous and informal interactions beyond interviews with Egyptian public figures. Such work would offer deeper insights into how embodied Egyptian norms are negotiated in everyday intercultural encounters.

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