

# Polysémie

## A Somatic Approach to Cross-Cultural Communication

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In a three-stage, research-based choreographic project, I posed the question of how we may better assimilate into a foreign culture. Can we call upon the body – the personal “architecture” of our interaction with the physical world – to bridge cultural differences? If so, how can we shed our daily cultural understanding and habits, even those of which we have little awareness, to embody another set of cultural understandings and habits? The tools of Laban Movement Analysis illuminate prominent body attitudes and can provide awareness to one’s own “body culture” and those of other “cultural bodies” themselves communicating with proficiency, and assimilating naturally to the environment. Developed by dance theorist Rudolf von Laban, Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) is a method for describing and documenting movement. Movement is a universal aspect of human nature; it may be a thread that binds, even when language divides. Using the LMA principles of Body, Effort, Shape, and Space (BESS), I analyzed a sampling of the body attitudes and communication practices of white Eurocentric French people of my age demographic, and compared it to a sampling of prominent body attitudes in my own culture, the predominantly white 18 to 25 year old population at the University of Florida. My experiments and conclusions led to a choreographic process, in which I tested the practice of awareness and application of “body culture” to create moments pointing towards cultural assimilation. The resulting product of this research, *Polysémie*, is a choreographic exploration of the use of certain tools from Laban Movement Analysis to decipher the complexities of cross-cultural communication and, ultimately, our understanding of communication as a whole.

### INTRODUCTION

Movement analysis is an integral aspect of daily communication. To decipher meaning in conversations, respond to the needs of an infant, or assess strangers on the street, we regularly read and respond to the language of the body, if only on a subconscious level. The primacy of somatic communication – or the kinesthetic manner in which one instinctually analyzes body language to garner meaning – suggests we may strategically use our body language and subsequent analyses to foster relationships and create positive social interactions (Wood). More specifically, I am interested in how the analysis of human movement may further cultural self-awareness and cultural communication.

The related work of dance theorist Rudolf Laban and social psychologist Julia T. Wood lays the foundation for understanding the intricacies of body level communication. Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) invented by Rudolf Laban, provides a codified approach to examining movement. As described by Professor Parul Shah, LMA is “a method for observation, description, prescription, performance, interpretation, understanding, and documentation of all varieties of human movement and expression.” It was developed alongside Labanotation, a notation system used to score choreography, and thus became a new language for movement practitioners and choreographers; however, the use of LMA expands beyond its original dance application.

In her text, *Interpersonal Communication: Every Day Encounters*, Julia T. Wood categorizes nine forms of non-verbal communication which form the basis of my research.

For specificity’s sake, the cultures being compared in this research are that of people of my own demographic: white 18 to 25 year-old male and female United States citizens to those of a similar demographic in Paris, France. My comparative analysis of culture was conducted by reviewing contemporary cultural artifacts, such as news broadcasts, contemporary dance choreography, popular films, and my own visual analysis and bodily experience in each country.

My research aims to define cultural differences in body attitudes so that one may further understand what isolates and defines tourists within foreign cultures. In order to fully immerse oneself in a foreign culture, there must be a cognitive understanding of the prominent body attitudes which are embodied in one’s own culture. LMA asserts that movement is an outward expression of inward intention, and therefore a psychophysical expression of the human condition (Shah). This psychophysical connection is what I am utilizing to facilitate assimilation and communication.

From this comparative analysis emerged a codified approach for communicating with possible ease and awareness, both cross-culturally and within one’s own culture. Bodily tension and subconscious habits inherent in one’s culture of origin can hinder assimilation; in another culture, these habits might be perceived as divergent from the norm, and easily be misinterpreted. It is my assertion that avoiding this kind of misinterpretation requires repatterning of body attitudes. This is the material explored within *Polysémie*, a choreographic work that embodies atypical body attitudes to explore this research in an “alternative world.”

## METHODOLOGY

My choreographic process is primarily rooted in research, academically, as well as within the cast itself by means of the dancers' participation and collaboration, and me analyzing their movement choices and body attitudes in real time. The process occurred in three stages: ground research, embodiment, and choreographic representation.

The ground research required me to determine the prominent body attitudes that distinguish French and North American culture. To determine these body attitudes, first I developed a kinesthetic glossary based on Wood's research, which served as the basis for physical analysis using the Laban paradigm.

Psychology recognizes nine aspects of non-verbal communication (Cherry). In order to research and apply LMA to these elements of non-verbal communication, I first consulted *Interpersonal Communication: Everyday Encounters* by Julia T. Wood. This text provides definitions for all nine forms of non-verbal communication within the context of Social-Psychology. The following glossary defines Wood's nine forms of non-verbal communication using the Laban categories of Body, Effort, Shape, and Space (BESS) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Kinesthetic Glossary

| Term               | BESS Definition   |
|--------------------|---|
| Facial Expressions | Facial expressions are commonly understood forms of communication; they convey emotion, intimacy, aggression, etc. Facial expressions can clarify the specific energy and dynamic a person is embodying.  |
| Gestures           | Gestures – an expression of movement usually isolated to the face and limbs – can be used to establish rapport with people, such as waving to an acquaintance in the hallway. They are widely understood within a given culture and can be embodied with a variety of efforts, weightiness, sense of space, and time, which color the interpretation of their meaning. For example, an enthusiastic wave thrashing wildly through the air occupying a large kinesphere, is interpreted differently than a polite, short, shake of a hand held close to the torso. |
| Paralinguistics    | Paralinguistics are the vocal communication beyond words, such as pitch and vocal range, “it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.” Paralinguistics allow listeners to decipher meaning beneath the words, such as detecting sarcasm, humor, or hostility. Vocal choices demonstrate efforts, a grunt that sounds like a punch is interpreted differently than a sigh that glides through the air.   |
| Posture            | Body attitudes – which are a full body expression of movement including the spine and whole torso – are similar to gesture in how they encompass many Laban categories. For example, folding the arms in front of the body could be interpreted as discontent or “I don’t agree,” due to cultural context. Whereas hands clasped behind the back could be, “I respect you and am giving you my full attention.” This is the shaping of the body which may reflect intention.  |
| Proxemics          | Proxemics refers to one’s kinesphere, or one’s concept of “personal space.” How much space the body occupies can establish intimacy, aggression, power, etc. The distance the limbs travel from the core can express intention as well; a reach with full   |

extension to the edges of the kinesphere reflect stronger desire than a reach that barely escapes the trunk of the body.

**Eye Gaze** - Eye gaze communicates interest, attraction, and sometimes trustworthiness. Eye gaze can also demonstrate different efforts, a direct glare with bound energy reads differently than indirect gaze or a lofty wink.

**Haptics** - Haptics is communication through touch, such as a comforting pat on the arm, or a stern handshake to convey power. This is how people shape themselves in response to each other, and the dynamic they use in addition to shape. In Western culture, applying the dynamic of “wring,” to a handshake conveys more aggression than “float” which may imply weakness or submission due to the often gendered qualities implicated in our culture’s adherence to ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity.

**Appearance** - Consider the goth style movement, using dark colors to create an intimidating appearance, thus establishing one’s self apart from the social norm. Effort-wise, appearance can reflect internal attitudes, such as a young woman wearing a sundress might exude lightness and free-flow of energy simply from her clothing choice.

**Artifacts** - Artifacts could include a police uniform, an online avatar, or a doctor’s coat. These are images that are immediately associated with meaning and can be understood without verbal communication.

*Note.* Terms are property of Kendra Cherry. Definitions formed by Haley Simmons based on information from Peggy Hackney’s book *Making Connections*.

Using the glossary, I analyzed movement from choreographer Nathalie Poubellier’s *Six*, an example of current contemporary dance choreography in France, and *Le Goût Des Autres*, a French film. From the stylized movement I saw, I expanded my research to include news broadcasts which surveyed the general public to examine their pedestrian movement (FRANCE 24 Live News Stream: All the Latest News 24/7). Moreover, I reviewed an article analyzing the French gestures for expressing emotion and reviewed their findings within the scope of LMA (Kelly). I drew conclusions about French expressions, body-attitudes and proxemics, which I then compared to that of my own North American culture by analyzing the film *Clueless* (1995), Mark Morris’ *Crosswalk* (2013), as well as observing the body language of my peers. The cultural artifacts examined were chosen to represent the predominantly young white community in the University of Florida’s College of the Arts, to mirror that of the white Eurocentric demographic in France. The difference in the cultural body attitudes is further clarified by contrast in the subsequent stages.

My second stage of the research focused on practical and anecdotal application, employed while living in France for six months. For this second stage, to facilitate communication and attempt assimilation, my goal was to situationally adapt to and embody what I determined were the prominent French body attitudes. Simultaneously, I explored abandoning my movement habits that reflected the North American paradigm.

In the final stage of choreographic application, I utilized the information I gathered in the prior stages to create a

modern dance work. In choosing dancers, I sought after those with strong improvisational abilities, as a large component of the piece was improvising in a world build upon the framework of communicative research.

Structurally the piece reflected the research process: the choreographed movement emerged directly from the glossary (Figure 1) and the improvisation score acted as a practical application of the research. The dancers learned the glossary bases of non-verbal communication and a separate movement based “language” invented for the work. This language, along with their assigned character roles, was further explored by putting characters in a controlled environment and setting that included accomplishing a task. The dancers envisioned themselves in a park with each character having a specific goal, and communicating with the others bearing that goal in mind.

Evidently, *proxemics* became a key element in facilitating assimilation, as French and North American concepts of kinesphere are vastly different. Therefore the concept of proxemics was explored in a conceptual and representative manner through the prop of helium balloons. The dancers treated them as obstacles and play-things, using them to explore their own respective kinespheres, and contrasting their sense of weight to that of the balloons. Throughout the piece, the balloons represented the adaptive nature of kinespheres and the cast’s ability to physically embody cultural adaption.

## RESULTS

As I conducted the research in three stages, the results for each stage or component impacted the progression of the next successive stages. The foundation established in the first stage of research seemed the most vital aspect, for it provided practical and actual physical means for experimentation and choreographic exploration.

By analyzing the French film, *Le Goût Des Autres*, (2000) Parisian news segments, a contemporary dance work *Six* by Nathalie Pubellier (2017), and Morgan Kelly’s article, *Don't Read My Lips! Body Language Trumps the Face for Conveying Intense Emotions* (2013), I began to understand a holistic reading of French body level communication within an LMA context. Similarly, to form an understanding of my own culture, I analyzed the film *Clueless* (1995), choreographer Mark Morris’ *Crosswalk* (2013), and observed the body level communication of my peers in the College of the Arts at the University of Florida.

The contemporary dance choreography gave insight into the prominent body attitudes each culture might embody for communication. Morris’ *Crosswalk* revealed the heteronormativity that rules North American body language and the implications of gender roles on a body level. The work opened with a woman accommodating or shrinking her kinesphere as men bustled past her through the space, often bumping into her. The male roles were expansive and unapologetic in their use of space, whereas the women

maintained closer proximity to each other and their own torsos for the duration of the work. Conversely, Pubellier’s *Six* displayed the more fluid notion of masculinity in France, as the men and women explored a range of movement dynamics that North Americans might have found more “gendered,” for the French it was simply movement. For example, female performer Wanjiru Kamuyu widened her stance and performed her entire solo in a variety of 2<sup>nd</sup> position *grande plies* (deep, wide knee bends). This is a very exposed position, and in contemporary American culture is colloquially referred to as “man-spreading” such as when a man on the subway spreads his legs and occupies more space than the seat allots.

In observing both performances I drew conclusions regarding the concept of space in relationship to land mass. The narrow streets and alleyways of Paris were exemplified in *Six*, as it was performed in an underground space below a library, and the dancers were in rooms much smaller than traditional performance spaces in the United States. Pubellier performed her solo in a small corner, lit only by a flashlight, and her movement was limited to her face and torso. Her movement was expansive yet intimate, and constantly retreating back toward her center. In contrast, *Crosswalk* was performed in a proscenium theatre, and the dancers traveled through the space with extreme range. Their personal kinespheres were extended to the fullest, and when moving as an ensemble, the space was filled. Yet, as is often present in North American dance works, through out the work, there was an even distance between the dancers maintained. Even partnered work concentrated more on the shapes the dancers made with their bodies, rather than how the space changed between them (as seen much more clearly in Pubellier’s work). Conversely, the partnered work in *Six* wove dancers together as a seamlessly connected unit.

From my research I concluded that the body language in North America is defined by the dichotomy between large emphatic gesturing and the decidedly closed off kinesphere that surrounds it. Gestures are used to express emotion, communicate ideas, and clarify points; they are simultaneously innate and learned, understood by connotation and context. American politicians typically use gesture to communicate or emphasize ideas. President Barack Obama often rhythmically nodded his index knuckle to emphasize key points in his speeches. By mirroring a head nod, his “knuckle nod” could carry a subliminal message of agreeability to his listeners and viewers.

Gesturing is widely used in North American culture, as well as many other world cultures, yet what makes North American culture so different is the concept of space. As a country, the United States is vast, and the kinesphere of the average American citizen reflects that. I have witnessed in my own community how Americans can become socially uncomfortable when kinespheres cross, reducing their desired “personal space.” Americans perceive this invasion of space as conveyors of aggression or intimacy; in other

cultures, like the French, it is likely just a part of saying hello.

In comparison to the American kinesphere, the French concept of “personal space” is a significantly smaller kinesphere. The French appear unphased when kinespheres cross. For the French, to sit close on a subway car is far from inappropriate. To hug or kiss a stranger they just met is expected. Smaller kinesphere is reflected in their gesturing as well. The French generally keep their arms closer in towards their torso, gesturing more with the face, rather than making exuberant arm gestures like their American counterparts. How might an awareness of one’s concept of space be used to assimilate? When traveling to France, an American might want to check the size of their own kinesphere, asking themselves how much space is required for their comfort in social spaces. In France, the supersized American kinesphere could shrink to accommodate their new surroundings. This will align their body attitudes to mirror those around them, creating a likeness and familiarity between strangers, rather than ostracizing themselves with their physicality.

Under the umbrella of “Effort” within BESS, there is another element that differentiates American and French culture. Time, which regards decisiveness, intuition, and timing, is treated very differently in both countries (Longstaff). Both cultures are monochronic, meaning that they view time as a linear concept, yet it manifests very differently. In French culture, the linear perspective regarding time allows for a direct flow of energy towards a given task, focusing singularly on whatever thing or task in which one might be currently engaging. In the United States, the emphasis on multitasking creates an indirect flow of energy, constantly shifting focus between many aspects of one’s life at once. The different concentration of energetic flow is important to understand for assimilation because it can directly affect communication. Communication between two Frenchman may be very direct and purposeful, whereas, in the United States, conversations may be more indirect, and constantly being altered by various outside stimuli. When attempting to assimilate into French culture, an American may want to consider providing their full attention to the exchange, prioritizing a direct flow of energy between the parties involved in the conversation. This can be done by directing gaze, mirroring posture, and regarding proxemics. Simply turning the shoulders toward the conversation partner, and holding an easy gaze between parties facilitates a steady flow of energy.

Comparing the French and American cultural tendencies of body level communication provides the opportunity to investigate the psychological term “mirroring” which refers the subtle and often unintentional mimicry of body attitudes, by which one may increase likeness and empathetic bonds with others (Tipper, Signorini, and Grafton). Applying this concept with a knowledge of BESS allows one to consciously re-pattern one’s own movement to better adapt to any given society. Understanding the French body

attitudes is essential to blending in, and understanding better their culture. If one travels to a foreign culture with the aims of maintaining their habitual patterns of social interaction, they will not experience the culture with the same depth and richness of someone who seeks to understand through assimilation.

As my research progressed to the second stage, the concepts above became physically embodied. The practice of consciously shrinking one’s kinesphere through awareness of proxemics and meditative visualization helped me find ease when navigating pathways on crowded rush hour Parisian Metros. For me, adopting the French attitude toward time created a simpler mental state, allowing for appreciation and indulgence in the French way of living. It also re-patterned daily habits so that there was an easy, seemingly natural assimilation to a new way of being. This reduced potential for “homesickness” as well there was constant attention to my neural repatterning and less indulgence in prior movement habits and mental attitudes.

It is in moments of social doubt that success can be found by employing the mirroring techniques explained by Tipper, Signorini, and Grafton. The act of subtly mirroring body language creates genuine likeness between strangers and interactions are often positive and empathetic. By communicating within a new schema, a different approach to living emerges, and coexisting with others in an entirely different culture is an easily attainable feat.

The experiences and data from the first two research stages led to a wealth of material to sort through for choreographing. The non-verbal glossary (Figure 1), the differentiating perspectives of monochronic time, the concept of mirroring and kinesthetic empathy, and the practical experience in France, all acted as choreographic inspiration for my work.

From my glossary, I created a root phrase exploring gesture, posture, and proxemics. This served as the backbone for *Polysémie* and a part of a formula for creating a movement language for the dancers. Elbows raised toward the sky embodied the French kinesphere, tight toward the center, yet in proximity, the dancers remained close, letting their kinespheres cross. As they lunged through the space, turned underneath themselves, and sank to or rose from the floor, the dancers represented the French ability to compact their kinesphere as well as the ease with which they weave in, and around each other (00:02:15 – 00:02:38). This language became the only means of communication in their performative world and, through the improvisational score, they used it to communicate with one another.

Proxemics were further explored by introducing a prop: helium balloons. Representatively, balloons are an ideal miniature kinesphere; for me, the way in which they interacted with the space represented the adaptable nature of the kinesphere. Their arrangement in the space and impact on the dancers was meant to convey one’s unique ability to grow and shrink kinesphere. In the dance during the “park” scene, the balloons were spread through the space like trees

in a park, their spacing architecturally embodying larger kinespheres that accommodate each other when moving in a large space (00:04:10 – 00:05:05). At other points in the dance, the dancers bustled in a tight circle of balloons like bees in a hive (00:03:30 – 00:04:10). The balloons were also actually clipped to dancers' costumes which counteracted the perceived weight of the object as the dancers sank under the ironically imagined weight of the balloons (00:01:52 – 00:02:12). This represented the adaptable nature of weight and space. People are completely in control of the perceived amount of space they occupy as well as its sense of density. We can grow and shrink our kinespheres at will.

Another term, *haptics* (communication through touch) and *proprioception* (unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation through the senses), was embodied by the dancers successfully accomplishing choreographic partnering tasks. Using their sense of organic physical logic, I assisted them in building partnered phrases. Starting from a frozen posture drawn from improvisation, they built phrases in full contact with one another. They moved logically from one partnered movement to the next, then reverted back to the starting point to repeat each time adding on another movement – an accumulation (00:02:45 – 00:03:50). This accumulative process created a specifically organized and continuous flow of energy, which as my prior research determined, is the key to conversing.

## CONCLUSION

As a choreographer, researching communication through movement was simultaneously challenging and rewarding. While dance is typically a non-verbal art form often with intentions of communicating ideas or narratives, to delve into an analysis of what is “natural” was intellectually stimulating. The often subconscious body attitudes that dominate communication are the subtle truth that permeates verbal communication. As a result of this research, communicating and choreographing with a newfound sense of clarity was inevitable. I now find myself searching for meaning in the body attitudes exhibited on television, in personal conversations, and between movers on stage.

My research demonstrates that the capacity with which we can ease assimilation is within feasible reach, and can be tested in a variety of cross-cultural applications; from study abroad advisors to Peace Corps training, this information is valuable and universal. The importance of this research is that the somatics and dance fields add valuably to the wealth of general and anthropological movement research in the field, and further validate the importance of dance and choreography as academic pursuits.

Building upon my work to date, I am interested in applying this choreographic structure to create more works that study communication. More specifically, I am pondering what it may mean to teach improvisational scores, which create language, develop characters, and place them solidly into movement “scenes,” with a distinct group that

does not all speak the same language. Having a group of dancers, and potentially non-dancers, engaging in communication on the body level, entirely absent of vocalization, would create an ideal set of circumstances for further analysis of this research.

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