

East and West read faces differently



LONDON: Westerners 'read' facial expressions differently from Asians, paying more attention to the mouth than Asians who focus heavily on the eyes, says a new study.

And the oriental "neglect" of the mouth can lead to more mistakes in interpreting a person's emotion, said the report in *Current Biology*, describing how feelings can be "lost in translation."

"We show that Easterners and Westerners look at different face features to read facial expressions," said Rachael Jack, from the team at Glasgow University, in Scotland, who carried out the research.

Lost in translation

"Westerners look at the eyes and the mouth in equal measure, whereas Easterners favour the eyes and neglect the mouth. This means that Easterners have difficulty distinguishing facial expressions that look similar around the eye region."

In the study, western Caucasian and east Asian volunteers were asked to look at photographs of faces with seven basic emotional expressions: happy, sad, angry, disgust, fear, surprise and neutral.

The Asian participants had difficulty recognising facial expressions of fear and disgust, mistakenly interpreting them as surprise and anger instead, said the study.

"Unlike the Western participants who took clues from the whole face... the East Asian participants focused mainly on the eyes, where the information is often just too similar to discriminate some expressions."

Cultural differences

Jack added: "Interestingly, although the eye region is ambiguous, subjects tended to bias their judgements towards less socially-threatening emotions – surprise rather than fear, for example.

"This perhaps highlights cultural differences when it comes to the social acceptability of emotions."

The report concluded that there were "genuine perceptual differences between Western Caucasian and East Asian observers" and said more research needs to be carried out.

"Otherwise, when it comes to communicating emotions across cultures, Easterners and Westerners will find themselves lost in translation," it said.