



Nonverbal Communication in Humans

Fatik Baran Mandal

To cite this article: Fatik Baran Mandal (2014) Nonverbal Communication in Humans, Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 24:4, 417-421, DOI: [10.1080/10911359.2013.831288](https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288>



Published online: 30 Apr 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 7494



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Nonverbal Communication in Humans

Fatik Baran Mandal

Department of Zoology, Bankura Christian College, Bankura, India

Nonverbal behavior includes all communicative acts except speech. Communication means conveying information through signals. We use body language without being aware of it, perceive and interpret other people's body language. Three classes of nonverbal behavior are the verbal-vocal, nonverbal-vocal, and nonverbal-nonvocal. Several gestures illustrate the relationship between verbal and nonverbal behavior. Nonverbal phenomena are most important in the structuring and occurrence of interpersonal communication and the movement-to-movement regulation of the interaction. Nonverbal signs help regulate the system, cueing hierarchy and priority among communicators, signaling the flow of interaction, and providing meta-communication and feedback. Experiences teach us unconsciously that space communicates.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, signal, culture, interpretation of nonverbal behavior, nature of nonverbal behavior

INTRODUCTION

Communication means conveying information through signals. Communication may be defined, following Wilson (1979), as occurring “whenever the behaviour of one individual (the sender) influences the behaviour of another individual (the receiver).” Communication involves a socially shared symbol system, or code (Weiner, Devoe, Rubinow, & Geller, 1972). Developmental interactionist theory (Buck 1994) of communication accounts for the co-evolution of symbolic and non-symbolic feedback processes and their integration into human communication. Although use of language is a unique human feature, different views revolve around different nonverbal behaviors and the situational context. Nonverbal communication typically sent with intent and used with regularity among members of a social community are generally interpreted as intentional (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996). Communication depends on the message, situation or the environment, and counterpart. The environment may contribute in understanding by creating a mutual harmonic atmosphere or may disturb the relationship.

A signal is a special original element that we perceive by sight, sound, touch, and smell. The fifth sense, taste, is not of much practical use in communication. Use of signals depends mainly on knowledge and empathy. Empathy is related with the skills of observation and listening. Three elements of a signal are the signal itself, what the signal refers to, and the signal interpreter. The signal is the crucial link between sender and receiver. We use body language without being aware

Address correspondence to Fatik Baran Mandal, Department of Zoology, Bankura Christian College, Bankura, 722101, India. E-mail: fatikspeaking@yahoo.co.in

of it, constantly perceive and interpret other people's body language. Information is conveyed through twisting hand, body posture, kick with leg, and facial expression, or twinkle in eyes.

NATURE OF NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

Nonverbal behavior includes all communicative acts except speech,

everything from facial expression and gesture to fashion and status symbol, from dance and drama to music and mime, from flow of affect to flow of traffic, from the territoriality of animals to the protocol of diplomats, from extrasensory of violence to the rhetoric of topless dancers. (Harrison 1973)

It also includes bodily contact, posture, physical appearance, and direction of gaze and the paralinguistic variables of emotional tone, timing, and accent (Argyle, 1969). Body movement or kinesics behavior, proxemics, olfaction, skin sensitivity, and the use of artifacts (Duncan, 1969), physical characteristics, eye movement, touching behavior, and environmental factors (Knapp, 1972) also belong with nonverbal behavior. Poyotos (1977) classified nonverbal phenomena based on the sensory channels, possible combinations of verbal and nonverbal communications, and on the interaction potential of the behavior. The sensory channels are acoustic, visual, olfactory, and tactile. The classes identified are the verbal-vocal, nonverbal-vocal, and nonverbal-nonvocal.

Nonverbal behaviors indicate basic social orientations that are correlates of major categories in the cognition of social environments (Piaget, 1960). These behaviors reveal the orientations toward basic interactions between persons. Harrison (1973) covers the nonverbal behavior domain under four codes, viz., performance codes based on bodily actions, artifactual codes (use of clothing), meditational codes involving manipulation of media, and contextual codes like employment of nonverbal signs in time and space. Nonverbal phenomena are most important in the structuring and occurrence of interpersonal communication and the movement-to-movement regulation of the interaction (Harper, Wiens, & Matarazzo, 1978).

Several gestures illustrate the relationship between verbal and nonverbal behavior. The gesture of folded hands for namaste, handshake, and smile is translatable into words. Nonverbal acts are sometimes a part of speech and function for emphasis. Examples are head and hand movements that occur more frequently with words. Some act is employed for displaying the feelings. Some refers to help start and end the speech of participants in a social situation that might suggest to a speaker that he keeps talking, that he clarify, or that he hurry and finish (Ekman & Friesen, 1969).

Nonverbal signs define condition and constrain the system. Time, place, and arrangement may provide cues to the participants as to who is in the system, the possible interaction pattern, and the appropriate and non-appropriate communication content. Nonverbal signs help regulate the system, cueing hierarchy and priority among communicators, signaling the flow of interaction, and providing meta-communication and feedback. Such signs communicate content sometimes more efficiently than linguistic signs but usually in complementary redundancy to the verbal flow (Harrison, 1973). Five general functions specified for nonverbal behaviors are the repetition, contradiction, complementation, accent, and regulation (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). In repetition, both verbal and nonverbal expressions are made simultaneously. The posture types, voice modulation, facial expression, and gesture that one should or should not employ in a particular context for a particular purpose is predetermined in a specific culture. Deviations from the well-set norm are classified into several abnormal varieties. Proxemics has revolutionized ideas, assumptions, and identification of domains of nonverbal behaviors and has led to explore areas and subject matter of experimental investigations on nonverbal behavior (Hall, 1977). Our communication system is not something we invented but internalized in the process of becoming human and contend the

communication is multi-channel. It includes both language and paralanguage; gesture and kinesics (Birdwhistell, 1970).

Hall's approach is very much cross-cultural, which considers culture as bio-basic with a root in biological activities and from a descriptive and ethnographic angle. Although the human is a culture-producing animal, in the remote past there was no human and no culture. This infra-culture became elaborated by humans into culture. Hall's major investigations center on man's use of space. Every living thing has physical a boundary that separates it from the external environment. That a space communicates is well-recognized in all societies. Use of space is closely linked with status as well. He finds that literally thousands of our experiences teach us unconsciously that space communicates.

INTERPRETATION OF NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

Interpretation of nonverbal behavior has been elegantly discussed in literature (Darwin, 1872; Andersen, 1979; Andersen, Garriso, & Andersen, 1979; Argyle, 1969, 1988; Buck, 1976, 1979, 1989, 1994; Buck, Savin, Miller, & Caul, 1972; Critchley, 1975; Johnson, Ekman, & Friesen, 1975; Sebeok, 1976). People in all cultures use nonverbal communication. Some expression is specific to certain cultures. Cross-cultural similarities and substantial differences in body language exist in the extent of the body language use and interpretation. The head gestures for "yes" and "no" are not the same in all cultures. The physical distance kept between participants in a conversation also varies from culture to culture. Use of gestures varies with individual psychological factors. Personality strikingly effects the quality, quantity, and type of gestures used. Daughters raised without fathers show more self-touching behavior than daughters raised with fathers do.

Men make more seating position shifts than woman, make smaller gestures, and move their feet less in the second interview than women. Women show more facial expression than men. Some particular body signals are significant to women while others are only by men. In a message, the verbal part (words) accounts for 7%, the vocal part (tone, dialect, accent) for 38%, and the nonverbal part (body language) for 55%. An average sentence lasts for 2 to 5 seconds. We all keep a personal distance to our interlocutors. When someone invades this personal space, we react with a rigid body or evasive look.

Self-confident people frequently preen, glance at their reflection in mirrors and windows, attempt to be the center of the discussion, and make flamboyant gestures. These people or leaders frequently volunteer for unpleasant tasks, are good listeners, and have a self-assured smile. They walk with confidence, almost striding, frequently with their arms moving significantly (men), have a firm handshake, are better dressed although conservatively and appropriately for the occasion, and dress in more expensive and more tasteful clothing. They have good hygiene, seldom follow trends, are willing to engage in conversation, make good eye contact, have a conservative haircut or hairstyle, have erect posture, and square their body to the person they are speaking to. Arrogant people often keep greater than average physical distance from others, bore easily and quit listening, make sexually suggestive movements and postures, and adopt affectations and mannerisms. Insecure or humble people frequently focus on others rather than themselves, have good listening skills, have self-depicting humor, have a quiet demeanor, and show courteous behavior. Embarrassed people frequently show nervous laughter, avoid eye contact, shake their heads, turn away, flush, and avoid people. Fearful people frequently have wide-open eyes, have hands over the face, freeze, look around, clutch hands together or grip an object tightly, place hands in front of the body, lean backward, grab other people, show heavy breathing or hold the breath, show rigidity, and lick their lips. Resentful people frequently cross their arms, stiffen the body, whisper, assume a posture with shoulders hunched, and cover the mouth with their hand.

Open-minded people frequently face the person to whom they speak, stand close to the other person, keep frequent eye contact, kiss or embrace when greeting, and show a firm, sometimes prolonged handshake. Sexual or romantic interested people frequently make eye contact, exaggerate a smile, laugh too much or at too trivial things, stare, wink, blink, wet their lips, cross and uncross legs, thrust out the chest or hips, enter someone personal's space, touch themselves, and try to isolate the target of their affection by getting him or her alone. Surprised people frequently step backward (if standing) or lean backward, show open mouth, and show wide-open eyes. Skeptical people frequently furrow brow, squint eyes, turn head slightly down, tilt the head slightly, and tighten the lips. Worried people frequently repeat actions, such as pacing, fidgeting, rubbing the face, and running hands through their hair and do not focus.

CONCLUSION

Interaction with other members of the species is a fundamental attribute in animals including humans. Such behaviors vary between cultures and are especially important in disturbed situations. Nonverbal communication is the only way of communication except in our species, *Homo sapiens*. Along with the language, it serves an important role in communication and shows the evolution of humans from animals.

REFERENCES

- Andersen, P. A. (1979). *Nonverbal communication: Forms and functions*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Andersen, P. A., Garrison, J. P., & Andersen, J. F. (1979). Implications of a neurophysiological approach for the study of nonverbal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 6, 4–89.
- Argyle, M. (1969). *Social interaction*. New York, NY: Atherton.
- Argyle, M. (1988). *Bodily communication* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Methuen.
- Birdwhistell, R. L. (1970). *Kinesics and context: Essays on body motion communication*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Buck, R. (1976). A test of nonverbal receiving ability: Preliminary studies. *Human Communication Research*, 2, 162–171.
- Buck, R. (1979). Measuring individual differences in the nonverbal communication of affect: The slide-viewing paradigm. *Human Communication Research*, 6, 47–57.
- Buck, R. (1989). Emotional communication in personal relationships: A developmental-interactionist view. In C. D. Hendrick (Ed.), *Close relationships* (pp. 44–76). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Buck, R. (1994). The neuropsychology of communication: Spontaneous and symbolic aspects. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22, 265–278.
- Buck, R., Savin, V. J., Miller, R. E., & Caul, W. F. (1972). Nonverbal communication of affect in humans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 23, 362–371.
- Burgoon, J. K., Buller, D. B., & Woodall, W. G. (1996). *Nonverbal communication: The unspoken dialog*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Critchley, M. (1975). *Silent language*. London, UK: Butterworth.
- Darwin, C. (1872). *Expression of the emotions in man and animals*. London, UK: Murray.
- Duncan, S. D. Jr. (1969). Nonverbal communication. *Psychological Bulletin*, 72, 118.
- Ekman, P., & Friesen, W. V. (1969). The repertoire of nonverbal behaviour: Categories, origins, usage and coding. *Semiotica*, 1, 49–86.
- Hall, E. T. (1977). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Harper, R. G., Wiens, A. N., & Matarazzo, J. D. (1978). *Nonverbal communication: The state of the art*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Harrison, R. P. (1973). Nonverbal communication. In I. de Solo Pool, W. Schramm, N. Maccoby, F. Fry, E. Parker, & J. L. Fein (Eds.), *Handbook of communication* (pp. 46–76). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.
- Johnson, H. G., Ekman, P., & Friesen, W. V. (1975). Communicative body movements: American emblems. *Semiotica*, 15, 335–354.

- Knapp, M. L. (1972). The field of nonverbal communication: An overview. In C. J. Stewart & B. Kendall (Eds.), *On speech communication: An anthology of contemporary writings and messages* (pp. 57–72). New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Piaget, J. T. (1960). *Psychology of intelligence*. Paterson, NJ: Adams Littlefield.
- Poyotos, F. (1977). Forms and functions of nonverbal communication in the novel: A new perspective of the author-character-reader relationship. *Semiotica*, 21, 295–338.
- Sebeok, T. A. (1976). *Contributions to the doctrine of signs*. Lisse, The Netherlands: Peter de Ridder Press.
- Weiner, M., Devoe, S., Rubinow, S., & Geller, J. (1972). Nonverbal behaviour and nonverbal communication. *Psychological Review*, 79, 185–214.
- Wilson, W. R. (1979). Feeling more than we can know: Exposure effects without learning. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 811–821.