

Non-Verbal Compatibility in Communication

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Abstract

Human beings are social by nature and remoteness is unnatural to them. The social communication has a lot of subconscious variations that are difficult to infer. Written words are passive, but face to face conversation message is conveyed at verbal and non-verbal levels. Time and again, words seems insufficient to transport spoken messages, and this insufficiency is complemented by the use of non-verbal features or body language. The focus of the present paper is to study body signals and its various aspects as an important part of non-verbal communication. At the same time, there is an attempt to explore the compatibility or incompatibility of the verbal communication with its non-verbal counterpart and to study the cultural variety prevalent in body language.

Key phrases: *Verbal and non-verbal signals; social communication; body language, cultural variety.*

Introduction

Charles Darwin, in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, wrote, “The power of communication between the members of the same tribe by means of language has been of paramount importance in the development of man; and the course of language is much aided by the expressive movements of the face and the body”(1899, p.408). The book was an immediate best seller and still provides research inputs on emotions and facial expressions. Darwin was right, although as a nineteenth century thinker, he might not have taken the notion of communication as seriously as we do today in twenty first century, because his main emphasis was probably on inheritance. Human beings are social by temperament and isolation is not natural to them. They try to keep in touch with the fellow beings through interpersonal communications. People are sometimes found talking to their pets in solitude. The interpersonal communication has a lot of subliminal varieties that are not easy to interpret. Written words are inert, but in face to face conversation message is conveyed at two levels simultaneously- verbal and non-verbal. Often words are inadequate to convey oral messages, and this inadequacy is supplemented and reinforced by the use of non-verbal features. These elements can be written in the form of graphics, pictures, maps, charts and diagrams or can have an unwritten form, which in a wider sense is referred to as body language. The present paper studies body signals and its various aspects as an important part of non-verbal communication. At the same time, there is an attempt to explore the compatibility or incompatibility of the verbal communication with its non-verbal counterpart and to study the cultural variety prevalent in body language.

Non-verbal and its Import

If we were to set aside all those communications which are expressed in words, what would be left? For anyone who regards verbal language as the canonical form, the answer to this question would probably be, ‘Not much’ and the residue will be a superfluous supplement to words. However, as the inmates of the twenty first century, specially the teachers of communication skills in English, we would react by saying that this so called residue exposes a level of communication of unparallel richness and variety, one in which humans express their true meaning. Jonathan Miller of Old Vic Theatre, London, in one of his highly intellectual Darwin College Lectures, has commented that the very idea of “. . . an articulate language is a barrier. . . . and that if only this barrier could be removed, human beings would

revert to golden age of wordless, heart felt communication”(1990, p.113). This part of “Wordless, heart felt communication” was perhaps lost during the evolution of man and in the shifting of the preference from the non-verbal to the verbal communication. Scientifically speaking, the answer seems to lie somewhere in the recent right-brain left-brain studies. Miller refers to it as an assumption, “. . . the verbal capabilities of the left cerebral hemisphere have been over developed by a culture which puts too much emphasis on linguistic finesse” (113) and “. . . right hemisphere has been dangerously neglected as a consequence” (114).

Man is born with the art of speech. Not only human beings but animals also communicate through cries, yawns, wagging of tails etc. During the early dawn of history, both used to communicate through their bodies and probably were undeclared teachers of non-verbal interaction for each other. Nature has gifted human beings with the body that has a surprising versatility of expression. It keeps on communicating endlessly, round the clock, with an infinite variety of abstract signals, that too without getting tired. Even while sleeping, body seems to convey a lot through sleeping postures, position of eyelids, snoring etc, which may indicate the physical and mental state of the person.

Although the most part of non-verbal communication is involuntary, it accounts for a larger part of the total message than the words. Communication experts seem to agree on this point. Lesikar, Professor, University of Texas, has reported, “Much of what we send to others without using words is sent through the physical movements of our bodies” (1997, p.435). As per one research done at UCLA, reports that words are only 7%, voice tonality 38% and body language 55% (“Six Reasons”). The numbers may vary depending upon the situation and the theme, however, it seems obvious that body language has the lion’s share and is of high importance in communication.

Non-verbal cues have an enormous influence on all of our individual communications. “There is simply no way to fully separate non-verbal communication from influencing an interaction” (Julie, Ann, “Body Language Interactions”. 2010. Quoted in Singh). It takes a rigorous effort on the part of a person who wants to deceive someone to establish a balance between verbal and non-verbal communication as “body language is such an innate part of communication that you have to make a concerted effort to use it in a way that goes against one’s natural tendencies” (Singh).

Most part of body signals are involuntary and are exhibited unconsciously. They are much responsible for the quality of our communication because there has to be a co-ordination between the verbal and the non-verbal signals. “The most effective communication occurs when verbal and nonverbal messages are in sync, creating communication synergy” (Patrick. W., 2005). Therefore, one should become aware of one’s body language and should learn to understand that of others as well. However, here comes a caution from Shalini Verma, a well-known Indian expert on body language, “. . .body language depends on the situation, on the culture, the relationship. . .the gender of the other person. . . .If you don’t take this into account you may get yourself into some serious trouble” (2005, p.2). Body language gives listeners important clues about thoughts and feelings of a speaker, confirming or contradicting the words he/she speaks. We achieve complete communication when our body works with our ideas. Body language should not be considered in isolation rather it should be taken in broader perspective of personal appearance and grooming, posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, power of voice and speech, pace, pause and rhythm, pitch etc.

Non-Verbal Features

Appearance is part and parcel of the message that we transmit to the listeners. As the saying goes, first impression remains the lasting impression and the first thing we communicate about ourselves is through our appearance. This impression is created even before we open our mouth to start conversation. Once we start speaking the person comes to know about our knowledge, skills and attitude. Although it may sound foolish, annoying and unfair but it is perhaps the only criterion by which most people can form their impression about the others. Well groomed people are generally regarded as people with skills, intelligence and professionalism, while a disheveled appearance puts them at a disadvantage in the eyes of

the observer. Very few people may stay around to discover the true worth of a person behind the superficial garb of an untidy appearance, sloppy mannerisms and ill fitting clothes. Attire is determined by the culture of a group. Normally, western official attire is accepted throughout the world, but if one is doubtful about informal dressing, Herta A. Murphy, of the University of Washington suggests “one should be more formal than informal Terms as ‘smart casual’ and ‘business casual’ are symbols for appearance; it is important that you know what they mean in your particular environment” (1997, p.398). A distinguished look is a composition of the elements - poise, clothes, fashion, accessories, jewellery, personal care, make up, hair style and dressing for the occasion. In addition to visual appeal, all these elements bring about self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem, hence, they should be cultivated singly as well as collectively to create a complete, harmonious and pleasing picture.

Body shape and posture play a very important role in communication and it can be positive or negative according to situation. What one says is important, how one says and what one does before and after speaking is equally important. We all are spontaneous when we talk to our friends and relatives, but as soon as we experience an odd situation we may become mindful of our posture. Good posture is natural alignment of the body. A physiotherapist would advise to keep ears, shoulders and hipbone in a straight line while sitting and on standing the same should be from hip down to the knee. A gait appears confident if a person walks straight, squared shouldered and stomach inside. There should be no tension at the back of the neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, pelvis, knees or ankles. Poor posture presents poor image of the body. Not only this, holding the head awkwardly puts a lot of strain on the neck and shoulders, extending the tension throughout the body, while an unnatural posture makes the body a mass of stresses which possibly result in an undue strain on vocal cords. Crossed arms and legs may indicate an unseen barrier or a negative attitude. On the other hand willingness to listen and attentiveness is usually conveyed by uncrossed arms and legs. Similarly, leaning away from the speaker most likely shows opposition, while leaning forward means that a person is open, honest and interested. Slumped posture presents a person in low spirits while erect posture shows his/her high spirits, energy and confidence. Listening by tilted head shows that the person is receptive. Such aspects of positive and negative posture can be numerous. However, with sincere and determined effort one can get rid of these traits and develop the right way of walking, sitting and standing.

Gestures refer to the movements made by hands, arms, shoulders, head and torso. Sincere and meaningful gestures derive suitable understanding and add greater value to what is expressed. Gestures clarify the notions and strengthen them; hence, they have to be comprehensive to the audience as well as the occasion. Too many gestures make a person look theatrical, while being still presents him/her rigid, wooden and devoid of expressions. Gestures should be natural and spontaneous and they ought not to distract the focus of the listeners nor should distract them from the message. For example hand movements should be used to add emphasis to what is being said but waving arms around all over the place; wearing clanking jewellery; fumbling with earrings, wrist watch; rings; key chain; holding hands firmly; cracking knuckles not only distracts the listener but also indicates hesitation, nervousness or lack of confidence. Sometimes involuntary gestures can give a lot of hidden information about a person’s mental state like that of concealing a truth. Alan Hirsch, St. Luke’s Medical center in Chicago, explained “Pinocchio Syndrome” as something when “blood rushes to the nose when people lie. This extra blood may make the nose itchy. The result? People who stretch the truth tend to either scratch their nose or touch it more often” (“Liar, Liar”, 2007). Gestures increase opportunities to improve bonding and establish a feel good factor. Researches have suggested that among babies “. . . gestures increase and consolidate brain connection, which contributes to earlier verbalization” (National Literacy Trust, 2007).

Face is the index of mind; it conveys warmth and sincerity and is the most animated part of our body. A smile represents sociability, a scowl for displeasure, raised eyebrows for doubt, stiffened

jaw muscles for resentment etc. Sometimes it is quite difficult to smile if one is nervous but it can create an illusion that one is at ease and confident even if one is not. It puts the vocal cords at ease and helps the speaker sound interesting. Facial expressions should be encouraging ones. It has been seen that often people assume virtual masks which are rigid and incommunicable. For instance, if the mask is that of tight lips and a tense jaw with little expression, speakers may not get enough encouragement to talk.

Eyes are the window of the soul; hence eye contact is an important non-verbal communication. Eyes are a significant point of feedback as a speaker looks at the listeners to find how they are reacting. The listeners too, may search for truthfulness, intelligence, attitude and feelings of the speaker. In a small group one should look at everyone at eye level, not above their heads. During public speaking or a presentation, one should try to encompass the audience from the extreme right to the extreme left not just at those sitting at the back. In a large group one can maintain eye contact by drawing a large 'M' or 'W' round the room. Maintaining an eye contact with one part of the audience may instill a feeling of neglect among them. It is not enough that one should look at the listeners, how one looks at them also matters a lot. Constant eye contact specifies that the person is positive of the speaker. If a person looks at the speaker but sits with crossed-arms, it could be a sign of that something is worrying the person. Fiddling with something while looking at the speaker means that the attention is somewhere else. The attention invariably wanders if a person is not being convinced by what the speaker is saying. Shalini Verma has extensively explored various types of human gazes. Formal gaze is appropriate for the boardrooms, business meetings, job interviews, project presentation, public speaking etc. here; one should look at the imaginary triangle on the other person's forehead, above the area between the eyes. With this kind of interaction one will be able to control interaction to an extent. Informal gaze is for interacting with friends and associates. One should let his/her gaze casually drop below the other person's eye zone forming an imaginary triangle downward on the area between his/her eyes and chin. This will add a congenial touch to the interface. One may use Lateral gaze to convey either interest or hostility towards the other person or situation. Interest towards something or someone can be shown by smiling and slightly raised eyebrows but while gazing laterally if one uses adverse gestures like down turned eyebrows, a furrowed brow or drooping corners of the mouth one may signal one's suspicious, hostile or critical thoughts (2005, p.16). So we should be able to analyze the situation, particularly in the professional world, and should make pleasant eye contact with the listeners to show that we are confident, concerned and interested. Dilation of the pupil of the eyes is also an important kinesic signal. Edward Hess reported that there is an unconscious widening of the pupil when the eye sees something pleasant (Quoted in Fast, 2014. p.2)

Voice, tone, pitch, volume, pace and pause are the paralinguistic aspects of body language. From the quality of voice and the manner of saying things, people deduce a great deal about the personality of the speaker in general and his/her emotions at the time of speaking-whether one is frightened, depressed, excited, aggressive or one is charming, confident or friendly. Information about one's age, sex, health conditions, geographical conditions and social origins may be easily gathered through one's speech even when people cannot see him/her. Buoyant voice, full of expressive changes of pitch and pace suggests a buoyant mood whereas a tired or flat voice suggests a more reflective, subdued and depressed personality. One should improve his/her speech quality to boost confidence, sharpen the impression he/she creates on others and communicate a message effectively in public and in private life by exploring the natural potentials of one's voice. "Your speech is unique to you as your fingerprints are and to distort it . . . is to distort your true personality" (*How to Write* 2005, p. 462). These qualities are tone, pitch, volume and clarity. It is not possible to change the quality of voice as no one can change the shape and size of the organs which produce voice and speech but it can be trained for optimum impact. However, everyone can emerge as an eloquent speaker by increasing muscularity and tension of his/her speech organs and training the quality of his/her speech.

There is a certain pitch at which one's voice operates most comfortably. By speaking to this pitch one can avoid straining one's voice. The rise and fall of the voice is essential to convey a variety of emotions. Inflection gives warmth, luster, vivacity and enthusiasm to one's speech. Lowness of pitch indicates sorrow, surprise, monotony, guilt etc whereas excitement, joy, triumph and anger are expressed by a higher pitch. A well balanced and well suited pitch results in a clear and effective speech.

Rate or speed varies from 80 to 250 words per minute. The normal rate is 120 words per minute. An extremely slow speaker appears to be dull even though the content may be very stimulating. Similarly, a rapid speaker causes uneasiness to the listeners as the latter need time in between to digest the thought and switch over from one thought to another. By deliberately increasing or reducing the speed we can make our speech interesting, create suspense and explain a difficult idea.

Pausing at natural breaks gives the speaker time to think what he/she has to speak the next and imparts expression to the speech. A pause before or after makes the words prominent; a skillfully placed pause makes the listeners alert and in presentations it is often employed effectually to emphasize a point. Sometimes it is more effective than random signals. A fast speaker must use pauses effectively.

Silence can be a highly effective means of interaction, if used positively and in the right context. The age old adage 'speech is silver; silence is gold' and that of Shakespeare, "The silence often, of pure innocence persuades, when speaking fails" (Winter's Tale, Act ii, Sc.2) undoubtedly refers to the superiority of silence over verbal communication. "Silence is not a negative absence of speech but a positive withdrawal or suspension of speech." (Rai 2003, p. 28) A well timed silence has more eloquence than speech. In face to face communication it can communicate a number of messages. Usually silence is used to convey the feelings of anger and displeasure. It can be very odd in a group if no one knows how to break it and it can cause discomfort on telephone as the person on one side has no clue of the expressions on the other side. However, with the help of right posture and proper facial expressions, silence can be highly effective.

Touch is an important element of body language. It goes beyond and forges a bond that is more on an emotional and spiritual level than on the physical one. Touch is an inherent desire of almost all the creatures. Children instinctively seek physical contact whenever they are disturbed. As one grows older, one tends to suppress this desire possibly due to social embarrassment. Vinita Nangia in *Times Life*, supports the natural desire of touch, "The Free Hugs Movements is creating waves across the globe," and conveys "hugging releases the hormone Oxytocin, which is proven to arouse a caring response in men and women." (TOI, Sunday Supplement, July 2007) Touch can also convey negative feeling if it is used unwillingly. In India one has to be careful as touch and the extent of it has its own cultural reservations.

Conducive Non-Verbal in a Classroom

Developing body language in communication skills classes poses a real challenge for the teachers. Children in schools are taught to write and speak English effectively. When they grow up, they learn hardly anything beyond improving their words. As they come to communication skills classes, perhaps, it is their linguistic and verbal ability that becomes a barrier to their grasping of right body language. Nobody can teach non-verbal signals rather they have to be nurtured in a natural way. The challenge is also due to the fact that the teachers of spoken English have to work very hard to bring a co-ordination between words and the language of the body which is most of the time found missing in the new learners. At the same time, a teacher has to be careful so that learners might not become conscious of their negative traits. Body language cannot be changed overnight as it is deeply rooted in the personality, being a product of genetic as well as environmental forces. This calls for a patient approach from the side of both the teacher and the taught. Learners should be told about various aspects of body language, their significance and variations in different situations. The section on 'Aspects of Body Language' carries a detailed exploration of body signals to be adopted or rejected. Learners should be made aware of their own body

language, and the help of video feedback can be taken. Students may practice in front of a mirror and observe friends and role models for inspiration. Videos and live demos can be of much help. Moreover, teacher's innovativeness in this case will be of great assistance to learners as lot depends on their background and quality. Internet is also a good source of updating oneself in this field.

Cultural Deviations of Non-Verbal

Verbal and non-verbal communications are greatly influenced by cultural background. In a country like India, there can be regional cultural variations too. For instance, the people of Punjab, being warm hearted and friendly, like to stand closer to each other and talk in a comparatively more informal tone than those of the other parts of the country. Here Murphy et. al. warn communication enthusiasts against taking cultural differences of body signals lightly, “. . . be cautious; know the variations that could cause the failure in communication . . .” (1997, p.88). In order to make inter-cultural communication work better, it is necessary to analyze and comprehend non-verbal cultural differences. A lot of research has been put into this field. One of such work was done to analyze verbal and non-verbal inter-human communication. Although, the research was carried out to transfer this analysis to human machine interaction, the study can also be helpful to interpret “a wide range of automatic applications in different fields e.g., rehabilitation, security, people identification, human behaviour analysis” (Avola et al, 2013).

People from the same culture are more likely to interpret words and actions rather accurately. However, cultural differences across the globe increase the chances of misinterpretation of non-verbal signals. A handshake, an embrace, a kiss on cheek and lips in public may be a traditional form of greeting in many western countries but in Asian countries like India, Pakistan and China such gestures are frowned and are considered actions reserved for one's private life. Murphy has vividly given examples of cultural variations in body gestures. Filipinos smile, when underneath this behaviour they are angry; the inscrutable expression of the Japanese does not suggest disinterest but an unwillingness to open up in public (87), in the U.S.A. ‘thumbs up’ is a positive sign while in Greece it is negative. (88) According to Lesikar, in the west most people sit when they wish to remain in place for sometime, but in many countries like India and some neighboring countries, people squat, which is considered as primitive by some westerners. Bowing as a greeting is traditional in Japan but may be interpreted as a sign of subordination in other cultures. (498) Therefore, one can see that it is not safe to assume that gestures used in all innocence in one country or region are accepted in the same manner everywhere.

Conclusion

Communication, in all its variety, is playing a dominant role in today's world of globalization. The visualization of the world as a global village does not appear to be possible without an effective use of communication. It has been observed in the present study that non-verbal feature, along with body language, constitute more than 93% part of any type of communication. Under such circumstances, it appears necessary that one should try to gain as much knowledge as possible on the various non-verbal aspects. This task becomes doubly important, especially for the teachers of communication skills in English. The present study, apart from discussing body language and its significance, has thrown light on the various aspects of body language like posture, gestures, eye contact etc. However, one has to bear in mind that these features are to be studied and used with much flexibility. They cannot be kept in water tight compartments as there are many variations in body signals which have to be taken into consideration. Words are generally responsible for conflicts in the world as they are sometimes misunderstood and if, such words are replaced or accompanied by positive non-verbal signals, perhaps, the world would be a better place to live in.

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