

BODY LANGUAGE: AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TOOL

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Abstract: This case study depicts how we communicate effectively using our body language. Body language is nonverbal communication that involves body movement. “Gesturing” can also be termed as body language which is absolutely non-verbal means of communication. People in the workplace can convey a great deal of information without even speaking; through nonverbal communication. Not all of our values, beliefs, thoughts and intentions are communicated verbally. In an ongoing communication, most of those are communicated non-verbally. In Non-verbal communication, our human body expresses our feelings and intentions through conscious and unconscious movements and postures, accompanied by gestures, facial expressions, eye contacts and touch. This collectively forms a separate language of the body within the ongoing communication. This is called Body Language.

Key words: Facial expressions, gesture, haptics, body posture.

Introduction

Philosophers and scientists have connected human physical behavior with meaning, mood and personality for thousands of years, but only in living memory has the study of body language become as sophisticated and detailed as it is today. The ancient Greeks, notably Hippocrates and Aristotle, considered the aspects of body language probably through their interest in human personality and behavior, and the Romans, notably Cicero, related gestures to feelings and communications. Francis Bacon (1605) explored gestures as reflection or extension of spoken communications. John Bulwer (1644) considered hand gestures, and Gilbert Austin’s Chironomia (1806) looked at using gestures to improve speech-making. Darwin could be regarded as the earliest expert to have made serious scientific observation about body language. Charles Darwin’s (1800s) work pioneered much ethological thinking. Ethology began as science of animal behavior properly established during the early 1900s and increasingly extended to human behavior and social organization. Ethologists have progressively applied their findings to human behavior, including body language, reflecting the evolutionary origins of much human nonverbal communication. Desmond Morris (1971) linked human behavior—much of it concerned with communications—to human ‘animalistic’ evolution.

Communication

Communication is commonly defined as the transmission of information. Its precise definition is disputed and there are disagreements about whether unintentional or failed transmissions are included and whether communication not only transmits meaning but also creates it. Models of communication are simplified overviews of its main components and their interactions. Many models include the idea that a source uses a coding system to express information in the form of a message. The message is sent through a channel to a receiver who has to decode it to understand it. The main field of inquiry investigating communication is called communication studies.

A common way to classify communication is by whether information is exchanged between humans, members of other species, or non-living entities such as computers. For human communication, a central contrast is between verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication involves the exchange of messages in linguistic form, including spoken and written messages as well as sign language. Non-verbal communication happens without the use of

a linguistic system, for example, using body language, touch, and facial expressions. Another distinction is between interpersonal communication, which happens between distinct persons, and intrapersonal communication, which is communication with oneself. Communicative competence is the ability to communicate well and applies to the skills of formulating messages and understanding them.

Facial expressions

Facial expressions as adaptations

One of the central questions in human evolution is the origin of human sociality and ultimately, human culture. In the search for the origin of social intelligence in humans, much attention is focused on the evolution of the brain and consciousness. Many aspects of human cognition and behavior are best explained with reference to millions of years of evolution in a social context (Byrne, 1995; Cosmides et al., 1992; Humphrey, 1976). Human brainpower can thus be explained, in part, by increasing social demands over the course of human prehistory (Dunbar, 1998). Social intelligence, however, is not reflected only in the brain, but in every adaptation that allows successful interaction in social groups. New advances in studying the biology of social behavior have not fully explored that most visibly social part of the human body, the face. The face is a visible signal of others' social intentions and motivations, and facial expression continues to be a critical variable in social interaction.

Although social intelligence is an increasingly rich source of hypotheses of cognitive and behavioral adaptations, the anthropological study of facial expression remains focused on essentially nonadaptive questions. Current anthropological views of facial expression tend to focus on the contrasts between universal and culture-specific explanations of facial expressions. Facial expression is either interpreted as a human universal, with basic expressions represented in all known human populations (Brown, 1990), or it is conceptualized as the natural outgrowth of cultural differences, with little overlap in expression from population to population (Birdwhistell, 1975). Physical anthropologists, with important exceptions (Blurton Jones, 1972; Fessler, 1999; and see Chevalier-Skolnikoff, 1973; Goodall, 1986; Hauser, 1996; Preuschoft and van Hooff, 1995 for comparison with nonhuman primates), have generally avoided the study of human facial expressions and nonverbal communication, leaving the interpretation of facial expression largely to psychology and to other branches of anthropology (Birdwhistell, 1970; LaBarre, 1947). The current state of research in facial expression, combined with the current interest in social intelligence as a driving force in human evolution, calls for the re-emergence of the study of facial adaptation in physical anthropology.

Establishing human facial expressions as biological adaptations requires a rigorous review of our current knowledge and ultimately the formation and testing of evolutionarily based hypotheses. The definition by Reeve and Sherman (1993) of adaptation is a guideline for developing evolutionary hypotheses, and allows the exploration of behavioral adaptations that have remained relatively unknown in physical anthropology. They define an adaptation as "a phenotypic variant that results in the highest fitness among a specified set of variants in a given environment." This definition is particularly suited to adaptive hypotheses of human behavior, because its requirements can be met with observation of current phenomena, and reference to phylogenetic factors is not required (Reeve and Sherman, 1993). What is required, however, is evidence of phenotypic variation, well-defined ecological contexts, and fitness consequences for a particular adaptation. The purpose of this review is to provide a framework for asking evolutionary, adaptive questions about human facial expression. First, we establish human facial expression as a

potential behavioral adaptation, by detailing the phenotypic variation, ecological contexts, and fitness consequences of facial behavior. A particular expression, the human smile, is used as an example of the potential of the adaptationist approach for understanding human facial expression in an evolutionary perspective. Finally, facial behavior is compared to that of nonhuman primates to provide some further phylogenetic perspective on the evolution of facial expression and its role in the evolution of human social intelligence.

Eye contact

Eye contact (also known as “direct gaze”) is a valuable part of nonverbal communication. Our brains have developed to pay close attention to eye contact and the messages that it conveys. Through eye contact, we can gather communication cues about tone, emotional state, turn-taking and more. While we don’t necessarily speak with our eyes, we use them to send and receive messages. For example, many of us have had a partner, sibling or friend give us a look that spoke for itself. To fully understand how eye contact is used in communication, it’s important to consider other factors as well. Cultural background and the specifics of a situation play key roles in how we interpret eye contact and what meaning it carries.

Importance of eye contact in communication

It can be distracting when the person you’re talking to appears focused on something besides your conversation. This is because we rely on observing other people’s eyes to draw conclusions about their mental and emotional states and the focus of their attention.

Research suggests that we use our knowledge of eye function to decode eye behavior. For example, when the eyes are narrowed, it improves visual acuity so we can discriminate smaller details. So, when we see someone else narrow their eyes in response to something we said, we assume they are trying to analyze and better understand the details of the message.

Similarly, we open our eyes wide to allow for more light, which can help us detect any potential threats. This function causes us to associate wide eyes with fear or shock. Eye contact helps us understand the tone of the messages we send and receive. It also helps us navigate the conversation. During conversation, we keep track of the gaze signals we give off. At the same time, we’re also decoding the gaze signals the other person is sending us. It’s suggested that our gaze during conversation depends on the sub-task we’re performing: speaking or listening. People often look for eye cues to let them know when speaking will begin. As the person speaking sends gaze signals related to speaking, the person listening sends reception signals that communicate attention and engagement. Making eye contact during conversation can notify the other person that your turn to speak is coming to an end and signals them to respond. It can also be used as a nudge to regain the attention of your conversation partner. Research suggests that we use eye contact subconsciously, but precisely, throughout conversation. This is to make the most of the shared attention between parties. The more eye contact, the more engaged each party is in the conversation.

Body Gestures

Movement of hands and fingers enhances communication. But, gestures are culture specific. A clenched fist may mean emphasis for an American but disrespect for an Indian. A thumbs-up sign or the movement of the index finger can communicate messages effectively. Continuous gestures should be avoided. Nonverbal communication, in short, adds, subtracts and amends our message. In an oral communication context, all the above features of body language play an important role. If you expect to communicate in a relaxed atmosphere, you have to terminate the stiffness with

appropriate components of body language. Though gestures are culture-specific, some of them have become universal cutting across cultural boundaries. They have become emblematic. A 'V' sign with index finger and central finger stands for victory. A thumbs-up sign could be used to show approval or to ask for a free ride. A wave of the arm is for a 'hello' or a good-bye. Emblems directly stand for a verbal message. Certain gestures are illustrators for they illustrate a point. An arm can be used to draw a circle. The index finger shown with a little shake stands to emphasize a point as an illustrator. Certain gestures made unconsciously will reveal the mental state of the speaker. Anger, fear, nervousness, etc., are often revealed by fidgeting, shifting of legs, etc. Twisting the shirt button or cuff-links, rubbing the necktie, scratching the cheek or nose, and stroking the chin are some of the innumerable unconsciously acquired gestures. If overdone, they may degenerate to the level of mannerisms. One has to avoid the habit of overgesturing in oral communication.

Body posture

How we hold our bodies can also serve as an important part of body language. The term posture refers to how we hold our bodies as well as the overall physical form of an individual. Posture can convey a wealth of information about how a person is feeling as well as hints about personality characteristics, such as whether a person is confident, open, or submissive. Sitting up straight, for example, may indicate that a person is focused and paying attention to what's going on. Sitting with the body hunched forward, on the other hand, can imply that the person is bored or indifferent. When you are trying to read body language, try to notice some of the signals that a person's posture can send. Open posture involves keeping the trunk of the body open and exposed. This type of posture indicates friendliness, openness, and willingness. Closed posture involves hiding the trunk of the body often by hunching forward and keeping the arms and legs crossed. This type of posture can be an indicator of hostility, unfriendliness, and anxiety.

Silence

In oral communication, silence plays an important role. People quite often talk about 'eloquent silence'. Yes, silence can send communication signals. Silence in a particular situation may mean acceptance or agreement, and in certain others, indifference, apathy or even anger.

Proxemics

People often refer to their need for 'personal space', which is also an important type of nonverbal communication. The amount of distance we need and the amount of space we perceive as belonging to us is influenced by a number of factors, including social norms, situational factors, personality characteristics and level of familiarity. For example, the amount of personal space needed when having a casual conversation with another person usually varies between 18 inches to four feet. On the other hand, the personal distance needed when speaking to a crowd of people is around 10 to 12 feet.

Haptics

Haptics is a form of non-verbal communication using a sense of touch. Some forms of Haptics communication is Handshake, or a gentle pat on back, or a high five. The sense of touch allows one to experience different sensations. Haptics can be categorized into five types :

- Functional/Professional
- Social/ Polite
- Friendship/Warmth

-Love/Intimacy

Managers and co-workers should know the effectiveness of using touch while communicating to their sub-ordinates, but need to be cautious and understand how touch can be misunderstood. A hand on shoulder may be supportive for one person whereas for another person it may be negative for another. We use handshake to gain trust and introduce ourselves. Haptics rules change according to different cultures, context and status of relationships. In US the main form of greeting is handshake, though with friends they may hug each other.

Conclusion

Body language is an important tool to help you communicate with the people around you. This paper shows just how powerful body language can be. Body language is not only crucial in a plain daily communication situation but also for the interpreter. Knowing how to read and use body language effectively makes it easy to see why it is not always a bad thing to be lost for words.

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