2017

Nonverbal Messages Tell More: A Practical Guide to Nonverbal Communication

Teri Kwal Gamble
*The College of New Rochelle, tgamble@cnr.edu*

Michael W. Gamble
*New York Institute of Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs](http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs)

Part of the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/facpubs)

Recommended Citation

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CNR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CNR. For more information, please contact lfazzino@cnr.edu.
We Cannot Not Communicate

Words alone cannot tell my story.
If you watch me
If you listen to how I sound
If you pay attention to my touch
You will learn more than my words ever will reveal.

What meaning do the words “nonverbal communication” have for you? Does it make sense to be using words to explain a form of communication that neither relies on nor involves them? Yet that’s exactly what we do as we contemplate the question asked, isn’t it?

We are all nonverbal communicators. Try as we might, we cannot avoid doing it. Without speaking a word, we consume and deliver thousands of non-verbal messages. The look we give someone whom we find sexually attractive. The way parents are able to distinguish their baby’s cry. How we study another’s face to deduce her or his feelings. The choices we make to “dress to impress.” Why we cringe when someone screams or glares at us. Why the smell of apple pie can make us feel “at home.” How we move when we feel dejected. How we sound when we are elated. Why we fill our speech with “ums” or “uhhs” when we are unsure. How we arrange our furniture at home or at work. How we decorate our space. The color we paint a room. The bumper stickers we place on cars. The slogans that adorn the T-shirts we wear. All communicate.
Even though we may not always be aware of all the messages we send to others, and may fail to pick up on and decode all the messages others send to us, we are broadcasting and consuming nonverbal cues all the time. In fact, we spend a large part of every day interacting without using any words at all. The nonverbal channel is credited with carrying as much as 93 percent of the emotional or affective meaning of messages sent and received. According to nonverbal investigator Albert Mehrabian, we can break down the emotional composition of messages this way:

- 38 percent of their emotional meaning is conveyed using vocal cues;
- 55 percent of their emotional meaning is conveyed using facial cues;
- 7 percent of their emotional meaning is conveyed using verbal cues or words.\(^1\)

While not quite as bullish about the potential of nonverbal cues, Ray Birdwhistell, one of the founders of the nonverbal communication field, affirmed that words carried no more than 30 to 35 percent of a conversation’s social meaning, leaving some 65 to 70 percent of the meaning to be communicated nonverbally.\(^2\) Thus, we may be talkative, but we also depend on other means than words to chatter away. This is true even when using new technologies. Witness the popularity of Pinterest and Instagram as well as Facebook’s wall! Large percentages of our communication are word-independent. But percentages aside, nonverbal communication is a powerful communication medium in its own right, with multitudes of scholarly studies demonstrating that body, voice, space, and distance, together with all the other aspects of nonverbal communication, are vital components in the communication exchange – occurring either in concert with verbal communication or on their own.

The presence of the nonverbal dimension – or “all communication other than words” – is the answer to the question we posed: “Why can you not not communicate?” Not like words, but present whenever we do or do not talk, nonverbal cues are exhibited by us all the time – with and without our conscious awareness. Nonverbal cues are analogic, continuously streaming, in contrast with words which are digital in form; conveyed by an arbitrary code; and have a starting and stopping, or on and off, point. We continuously give off nonverbal clues to our feelings and attitudes even when our words are absent or silenced.

**WHY COMMUNICATION HAS NO OPPOSITE**

Understanding “why we cannot not communicate” lays the foundation for our study of nonverbal communication and the role it plays in our life. To explain further,
we turn to Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson’s axioms or universally accepted principles of communication.³

**AXIOM 1. The impossibility of not communicating. You cannot not communicate.**

Behavior has no opposite. It is not something one can choose not to do. Even if we try not to respond, even if we try not to move a muscle or make a sound, our stillness and silence have communicative value. What is more, because we are always sending messages, there is always information about us available for others to decode. Others can look at our facial expressions and decide if we’re happy or sad. They can look at what we’re wearing and draw conclusions about our sense of style. They can observe how we stand, sit, or move and make instant judgments about our approachability. They can smell our perfume or cologne and react to us based on its fragrance. They may not be correct in their interpretations, but nonetheless, they give meaning to our behavior based on their reading of our nonverbal cues. At the same time, it is quite likely that every day we communicate unintended messages to others – messages that we had no intention of sending them.

**AXIOM 2. Every interaction has a content and relationship dimension.**

The content dimension of a message involves an expected response, while the relationship dimension suggests how the message is to be interpreted, revealing the feelings of the parties towards each other. For example, a woman says to the person she is with “Come here now.” The content, or response expected, is that the person being addressed will approach. But how the message is spoken will determine the actual reaction. Is the message delivered as an order, a flirtation, or a plea? The manner of delivery suggests the relationship that the parties to the interaction share, revealing how each sees him- or herself in relation to the other.

**AXIOM 3. Every interaction is defined by how it is punctuated.**

When it comes to behavior, and thus interaction, we cannot determine either an absolute beginning point nor an ending point. Though we often try to, communication between us has no definitive start or finish line. For this reason, identifying what is stimulus and what is response becomes problematic. Consider this situation:

> John is repeatedly late coming home from work. When he arrives home, he finds an angry spouse. John’s partner believes that she has a right to be angry because John’s lateness is habitual. John defends himself, noting that he comes home late because his spouse is always angry when he’s home.
Neither John nor his spouse should be interpreting their actions in isolation. For his partner, John’s behavior is the stimulus and hers the response – John causes her behavior. John, in contrast, sees the sequence differently – his partner’s behavior is the stimulus for his behavior. Who is right?

We all segment behavior differently, because we see it differently. Punctuation occurs when we divide communication into segments. How we divide or punctuate experience usually benefits the punctuator. Punctuation reveals how we interpret a situation; as such, it offers insights into how we see our relationships.

**AXIOM 4. Messages comprise verbal symbols and nonverbal cues.**
As we noted, there are two key message types: discrete, digital, verbal symbols or words, and continuous, analogic, nonverbal cues – with no determinant beginning or end. While a message’s content is apt to be carried via the digital system, the relationship level is made clear via the nonverbal or analogic system. Words are easier to control than nonverbal cues. We may choose not to speak angry words, but the look on our face may still convey the rage we are experiencing. Nonverbal behavior is more likely to give away how we really feel.

**AXIOM 5. Interactions are either symmetrical or complementary.**
When we share a symmetrical relationship, we mirror each other’s behavior. If you are solicitous towards me, I will be solicitous towards you. If you yell at me, I will return the yell. In contrast, when we share a complementary relationship, we engage in opposite behaviors, with your behavior precipitating the opposite in my behavior and vice versa. If you are introverted, I become extroverted. If you acquiesce, I command.

When we share a symmetrical relationship, we run the risk of experiencing “symmetrical escalation.” Believing in our equality, we both might decide to assert the right to be in control. And so the competition or struggle for power begins. “We are equals,” we think, “but I’m just a little bit more equal,” we tell ourselves. When we share a complementary relationship, we may find ourselves experiencing “rigid complementarity” – or extreme rigidity – found in examples such as the mother who cannot accept that her child has become an adult – because she is locked into a role – and persists in telling “her child” what to wear and when to carry an umbrella.

Switches in relational power are natural. It’s the unbridled competition or getting stuck that is unnatural.
Taken together, these axioms set the stage for our sojourn into the nonverbal dimension by alerting us to the fact that words only convey so much; to understand relationships and the emotions and attitudes that accompany them, we need to look not only at our words, but beyond them. Let’s begin.

**NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS**

One definition of nonverbal communication is that it is “all communication other than words.” Another is “communication effected beyond words.” Yet another is “communication that is analogic and nonlinguistic.” Each definition is true. While nonverbal communication sometimes occurs together with or alongside verbal communication, it always occurs in the absence of verbal communication. Nonverbal messages may be sent purposefully and intentionally, or unintentionally and unconsciously. But however the cues comprising nonverbal communication are sent, they comprise communication behavior other than words.

Nonverbal messages also take on different values. You can, after all, smile broadly or slyly. You can whisper or yell. You can be physically near or distant. And, as we established, because of the analogic nature of nonverbal communication, it is nonlinguistic, deliberate, and directly related to what it represents.  

**NONVERBAL INVESTIGATION: Watch, Listen, and Learn**

Spend five minutes unobtrusively attending to the nonverbal behavior of another student who is dining in the college cafeteria or working in the college library. Be sure it is a student whom you do not personally know. Then based on your observations, develop a series of statements you feel comfortable making about the subject you chose. For example, “I would feel comfortable approaching this person.” “This person is anxious.” Then specify one or more observed behaviors to which you attribute each of the judgments you made.

We will benefit by expanding our awareness of the nonverbal cues available for our inspection. A multitude of visible nonverbal messages emitted by others are available for us to take note of and interpret every minute of every day. When we negotiate a business deal, interact with a professor, or arrive for a date, we dialogue nonverbally with one another – whether or not we also choose to speak aloud.

Of course, there are some nonverbal messages that remain invisible to us. For example, it is difficult for us to discern specially fleeting nonverbal movements of the face and eyes – known as micromomentary facial expressions. These “quicker than the eye can see” cues reveal the actual emotions others are feeling as opposed to the emotions they would like us to believe they are experiencing.
Categorizing Nonverbal Cues

We group nonverbal cues into the following categories to facilitate discussion and analysis of them.

Facial Cues
The face is the primary broadcaster of emotional state. Facial expressions reveal how we feel and whom we care about. Our face lets others know if we are attracted to them or interested in what they say.

Eye Cues
Eyes talk. Gaze direction communicates. Making eye contact opens a communication channel; avoiding making eye contact shuts the channel down if it was opened or keeps the channel closed. Pupil dilation and contraction reveal even more about our thoughts – pupils dilate when we take an interest in something and contract when we are turned off.

Body Cues
Your gestures, posture, gait, and bodily appearance communicate information about you to others. For example, whether you are feeling uptight or relaxed, or eager or hesitant, is revealed by your movements. Others also form judgments of you based on your build, the color of your skin, and hair color and style.

Touch Cues
Haptics is the study of the meanings communicated by tactile communication. The presence or absence of touch announces your feelings towards yourself and others, including how interested you are. Touch can be used appropriately or inappropriately. It can be embracing or offensive, relationship-building or upsetting.

Artifactual and Clothing Cues
What you wear; adornments on your body or in your hair; whether you have a tattoo or body piercing; favored design elements, including the colors you use in your home and how you furnish a room, announce to others how you feel about yourself and your surroundings. All communicate a message about you.
Spatial Cues

Proxemics is the study of the messages communicated by space and distance. The physical context and its architecture, together with a room’s furniture and seating arrangements, influence interaction. We are territorial – creating a personal comfort zone – and using different means to stake out and protect our territory.

Vocal Cues and Silence

Both the sound of speech and its absence – silence – communicate. Vocal characteristics – variations in pitch, volume, rate, as well as hesitations, pauses, and silence – help qualify spoken messages.

Time Cues

Chronemics, the study of messages communicated by time, tells us much about us and our culture, including what we value and how important being punctual is to us.

Smell and Taste Cues

Olfactics, the study of messages communicated by fragrances and scents, reveals our reaction to and thoughts about different odors. Together with flavor they reveal what makes us feel comfortable or uneasy.

Each one of the preceding categories is a key ingredient in nonverbal communication, operational in every context we will explore. In order to lay a foundation for investigating the spectrum of nonverbal cues that are at work in the varied contexts of our lives, we will explore each of them individually in succeeding chapters.

EXPLAINING NONVERBAL FUNCTIONS

Nonverbal messages fulfill four functions: (1) they substitute for verbal messages, (2) they emphasize words spoken, (3) they contradict or negate verbal messages, and (4) they regulate or control verbal interaction. Each of these functions, in addition to clarifying the content of what is spoken, also helps in conveying information about the relationship level of human interaction.
**Substituting**

A nonverbal message can substitute for or replace a verbal one. Imagine this: your significant other is in surgery; it is a serious medical procedure. You sit in the waiting room awaiting the doctor’s report of how the operation went. The physician enters, flashes a big smile and a thumbs-up gesture. No words were necessary. The physician’s demeanor indicated that the procedure went well.

**Emphasizing**

A nonverbal message can emphasize or accent a verbal message by adding redundancy to the words said aloud. When a love interest approaches, as you say “Hi. I’m so happy to see you” you also smile as your eyes widen with happiness and you embrace. Your nonverbal cues strengthened your words. The nonverbal message and your words complemented one another.

**Contradicting**

The nonverbal cues you emit can reveal a lack of sincerity in your words. You pull your significant other towards you, as you say “I never want to see you again.” Or, you say to someone you intensely dislike “I’m really happy you’re here,” as you walk away, distancing yourself from her or him. Which message will the other person respond to? When we receive a double or mixed message, one in which the verbal and nonverbal messages contradict or conflict with one another, most of us tend to interpret the nonverbal message as the more truthful.

**Regulating**

Nonverbal messages help regulate verbal interaction by indicating when to speak and when to listen. Head nods, eye gazes, and pauses are just some of the cues used to control and manage the back-and-forth flow of communication. Conversation narcissists, individuals who monopolize talk, either are not good at picking up regulation cues or have decided purposefully to ignore them – sometimes because they simply love to listen to themselves.
WE CANNOT NOT COMMUNICATE

WHY THE NONVERBAL DIMENSION MATTERS

“It’s not what you say, but how you say it.” “Actions speak louder then words.” “What you do speaks so loud, I can’t hear a word you say.” “Don’t tell me. Show me.” Each of these familiar maxims spouts a truth about the nonverbal dimension – we often place more significance on nonverbal cues than on words, making the nonverbal dimension of a message its most important part. Thus, being able to use and decipher nonverbal cues effectively in everyday life is essential for success in virtually every life context. How prepared are you at expressing and interpreting nonverbal cues?

NONVERBAL INVESTIGATION: Developing Self-Insight

A little more than a decade ago, nonverbal communication researchers Janella Rosip and Judith Hall developed the Test of Nonverbal Cue Knowledge. How well you do on the test is predictive of your competence at reading nonverbal cues. If you had to imagine getting a grade for your current nonverbal skills, what grade would you predict for yourself?

The following questions are adapted from the test. For each question asked, indicate whether you think the statement is true or false:

1. Widening your eyelids when speaking emphasizes your words.
2. With a high degree of accuracy, most of us are able to recognize a speaker’s identity without seeing him or her.
3. We are likely to keep greater interaction distance with someone with whom we are unfamiliar than with someone whom we know.
4. The size of one’s pupils influences interpersonal attraction.
5. Nodding your head rapidly signals the desire for the speaker to finish quickly.
6. We touch ourselves more when telling the truth than we do when lying.
7. Blinking suggests physiological arousal.
8. Men, more than women, pay attention to nonverbal cues they can see when compared with those conveyed by the voice.
9. Where you sit in class does not influence your participation.
10. Most observers can tell whether another person’s facial expressions are genuine or forced.
11. When we become socially anxious, we tend to gaze more at the other person during interaction.
12. When feeling stressed, we lower our pitch.
13. When we become angry, speech rate slows.
14. A person’s eyes reveal amusement or enjoyment.
15. It is possible to estimate another person’s age based on the sound of the person’s voice.
16. Men are better than women at reading facial cues.
17. When angry, most people don’t lower their brows.

18. Interpersonal attraction is not correlated with how close we stand to one another.

19. Persons who dominate in conversations gaze more when speaking than when listening compared with persons who are less dominant.

20. We are likely to approach high-and-low-status others more closely than we approach those whose status we perceive to be equal to our own.

Award yourself 5 points for every correct answer. The answers to the test can be found on pages 16 and 17. Were the grade expectations you had for yourself confirmed? Which answers to specific questions surprised you? However you performed on this test, there is still much to learn.

We tend to be less aware of our nonverbal communication when compared to our awareness of verbal communication. We undergo formal training from elementary school on in how carefully to compose and then reflect on words written or spoken. When it comes to nonverbal communication, however, it is rare for someone to tell us how to express anger (unless we are told to take a class in anger management), or how to act when we are happy. The lessons we receive in nonverbal communication are much less formal. With experience, some of us pick these lessons up, and some of us don’t. The point is, however, that we can all do better — and should aim to do better for professional as well as personal reasons. Nonverbal expertise is beneficial not only in your relationships, it is beneficial to your career whether you are a psychologist; an officer of the law; in human resources; or in homeland security, or hotel and restaurant management — or, in fact, in virtually any career sphere where enhancing your understanding of people is helpful.

Persons skillful in sending and receiving nonverbal cues tend to attain greater interpersonal and professional success than do those in whom such skills are deficient. Who wouldn’t want to improve their ability to use and read nonverbal messages effectively? After all, first impressions are often conveyed nonverbally, as are the inferences we make about one another during interaction. And we want the first impression we make to be a good one, and we want the inferences we draw to have a high degree of probability of being correct. To realize each of these goals, we need to be able to judge who is credible, and we need to be able to get an accurate read of someone’s emotional state. That means we need to pay attention to nonverbal behavior, or we will miss much of what is being communicated.

Nonverbal messages help us to present ourselves to others. They also help us to identify one another. By using the cues available to us, we can better control our interactions and the nature of our relationships. Besides letting others know how we feel, we use nonverbal cues to send specific information to other people. And based on our read of others’ nonverbal cues, we attempt to identify their emotions and attitudes as well as determine whether they are telling us the truth.
We cannot not communicate

**Nonverbal Communication: Fact and Fiction**

Want to use nonverbal communication to read minds? Want to be 100 percent accurate in predicting who is a liar? Want to travel the world with what you picked up about nonverbal communication from watching others in your hometown? Well, that’s just fiction! Here are the facts.

**Fact.** Becoming a nonverbal specialist will not turn you into a mind reader.

While neuroscientists may take an MRI of your brain and determine which of its different parts are activated by different thoughts, you are not able to tell what another person is thinking simply by observing their behavior. On the other hand, if you become skilled in reading facial expressions, it is likely that you will be able to identify the emotion a person is feeling.

**Fact.** The likelihood that you will be able to predict when someone is lying is no greater than chance – you will be right 50 percent of the time.

Studies have shown it is difficult to identify when someone with whom you are close is lying to you. Like the actor, they have trained themselves to deceive you.

**Fact.** Not all nonverbal messages have the same meanings across cultures or borders.

While some emotions such as happiness and sadness may be expressed similarly in different cultures, many nonverbal cues will be given different interpretations by persons from different cultures.

**Fact.** Nonverbal communication is learned.

Much of what we know about nonverbal communication, we pick up from watching and imitating others. We learn to use nonverbal cues much like we learn to speak words. We follow the rules. And when we break the rules, there can be consequences, and we can be misunderstood by others or misunderstand others.

“Hmm,” you say. “If I’m not going to be able to read a person like a book, why should I bother becoming a nonverbal specialist?” The answer is that mastering nonverbal communication has its benefits. Besides increasing your understanding of others, it gives you the tools needed to reinforce the verbal messages you send, making you better at conveying information and persuading others. You also can use what you learn to enhance your self-presentation skills, increasing your likeability and popularity – and that’s not just in your personal relationships, but in your professional relationships as well.

Of course, you can use the skills you learn, like all knowledge, for good or ill-conceived purposes. For example, becoming an expert at managing the impressions you make can help you dupe others into believing things about you and your message that may be untruthful. But we can lie with words too, can’t we? On the other hand, the cues others reveal to you also help determine your first impressions of them. Thus, learning how to use and interpret nonverbal messages can allow you better to express yourself and your emotions while also ensuring that the messages...
you send are not confusing or distracting to others. The cues you receive similarly influence whether your judgments of those sending them will be positive or negative. Understanding nonverbal communication can benefit sender and receiver alike; it all depends on the skills that each brings to the table.

**NONVERBAL INVESTIGATION: Follow-Up**

Select a topic or concept discussed in this chapter that you would like to investigate further.

Identify and read a research article that is related to your selected topic or concept. Summarize the article, being certain to identify specific information that adds to our knowledge of the topic/concept. Also discuss the significance of this information, particularly its relevance for us.

Provide an example from your own life or the media that explains the impact of your chosen topic/concept on person-to-person interaction.

Locate a photograph or video, perhaps on YouTube, that illustrates the topic/concept in action.

Provide examples of how being knowledgeable about the topic or concept will enhance your nonverbal skillfulness.

Compare and contrast US practices relevant to the topic/concept with the practices of another culture.

**ANSWERS TO QUIZ: Developing Self-Insight**

1. Widening your eyelids when speaking emphasizes your words. T
2. With a high degree of accuracy, most of us are able to recognize a speaker’s identity without seeing him or her. T
3. We are likely to keep greater interaction distance with someone with whom we are unfamiliar than with someone whom we know. T
4. The size of one’s pupils influences interpersonal attraction. T
5. Nodding your head rapidly signals the desire for the speaker to finish quickly. T
6. We touch ourselves more when telling the truth than we do when lying. F
7. Blinking suggests physiological arousal. T
8. Men, more than women, pay attention to nonverbal cues they can see when compared with those conveyed by the voice. F
9. Where you sit in class does not influence your participation. F
10. Most observers can tell whether another person’s facial expressions are genuine or forced. T
11. When we become socially anxious, we tend to gaze more at the other person during interaction. F
12. When feeling stressed, we lower our pitch. F
13. When we become angry, speech rate slows. F
14. A person’s eyes reveal amusement or enjoyment. T
15. It is possible to estimate another person’s age based on the sound of the person’s voice. T
16. Men are better than women at reading facial cues. F
17. When angry, most people don’t lower their brows. F
18. Interpersonal attraction is not correlated with how close we stand to one another. F
19. Persons who dominate in conversations gaze more when speaking than when listening when compared with persons who are less dominant. T
20. We are likely to approach high-and-low-status others more closely than we approach those whose status we perceive to be equal to our own. F

Notes