

Communication Skills: Lecture No. 7

Module 3

Lecture 3

Nonverbal Communication

In this module, you will learn about

The Beginnings of Nonverbal communication

Types of Nonverbal Communication

Importance of Body Language

Voluntary/Nonvoluntary Body Language

Body Language: Basics and Universals

THE BEGINNINGS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

You will be interested to know that nonverbal communication has its origins with ornithologists and biologists. Those people who studied about birds and animals tried to identify, codify, and explain the aspect of nonverbal communication. The biologists were the first to investigate body language. Initially it started with watching birds and noting their behaviour, and later this was followed by people who developed interest in studying animals

such as Charles Darwin who wrote the famous *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals* in 1872. This book offered a pioneering study on body language, though, Darwin did not talk particularly about human beings. He started observing animals first and then started linking their behaviour with that of the humans and tried to find some universal patterns.

This was followed by Desmond Morris who wrote *The Naked Ape* in 1967. Morris, being a Zoologist, the book was subtitled as *A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal*. Morris named the human beings (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) “the naked ape” because only human beings among 193 species of monkeys and apes have bodies not covered in hair. Morris’ attempt to study the sexual features of human beings in comparison and contrast with those of animals was considered unorthodox by many academicians. Similarly, *Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt*, an ethologist (that is, a zoologist who studies the behaviour of animals in their natural habitats) wrote *Love and Hate Natural History of Behaviour Patterns* in which he found many similarities between human and animal facial expressions and the emotions they conveyed. We will look at those expressions in detail in the form of basics and universals soon.

NATURE OR NURTURE DEBATE

Meanwhile, it is relevant to know something about the debate whether nonverbal communication associated with nonverbal behaviour is given naturally to human beings or it is culturally developed. Is our body language given to us by god, something that is innate or is it something that can be cultivated as a civilized behaviour? Usually ethologists like Darwin, Morris, Ekman and Friesen are convinced that it is in our nature, in the genetic coding, in the form of D.N.A structure and hence it is innate, inborn. Most of the human traits, for them, are inherited. There are enough supporting evidences to go by this thinking because the ways in which certain emotions are expressed appear to be universal. For instance, narrowing of the eyes is a universal and natural behaviour. That’s why in the Japanese comic (*manga*), the heroes are wide eyed (indicating innocence, honesty, directness, straight-forwardness) unlike the narrow eyed villains (connoting manipulation, wickedness and evil). Narrow eyes suggest being secretive and concealing one’s innermost thoughts, while the eyes that are wide open suggests an open heart and candid behavior.

This could also be seen in terms of the way we use *territory*. The ways in which human beings use *space* and animals use territory have a lot of correlations. Like the nest for birds and caves for wild animals, humans need their houses to shelter them and give them security. Like for birds and animals, home is a private space where intimate relationships are formed and

developed. Strangers are not allowed to encroach upon private territories in both cases. Birds become violent when you try to steal the egg from their nests. Animals become ferocious if anybody touches their young ones. Human beings exhibit similar protective behaviour when they perceive threat to their home or to their children. Thus, on the one hand, the theory that our communicative behaviour is natural, genetically given, and is universal is well-grounded.

Nature or Nurture?

The genetics debate

• Use of territory



• Safeguarding of private space



On the other hand, Anthropologists, Sociologists, and Communication theorists like Erving Goffman, E. T. Hall and Albert Mehrabian believe that our behaviour is *functionally* learnt, hence, it could be *cultivated* by consistent practice. They are of the strong opinion that nonverbal behavior is used to fulfil communication functions. They believe that a desired behaviour can be nurtured and developed for using in appropriate communicative situations. This is true because the various ways in which nonverbal behavior is involved in greeting people, shaking hands, hugging, smiling, saying *Namaste*—are all gestures and polite mannerisms learnt culturally.

Now, if you ask me which part of the nature-culture debate I side with, I would say as a teacher of communication skills, though there are some inherited core behaviour, I strongly believe that many of our gestures, especially the ones we use for positive reinforcement of our verbal communication, can be learnt and cultivated.

Just Functional?



Functional:



NVC is used to fulfill communication functions.



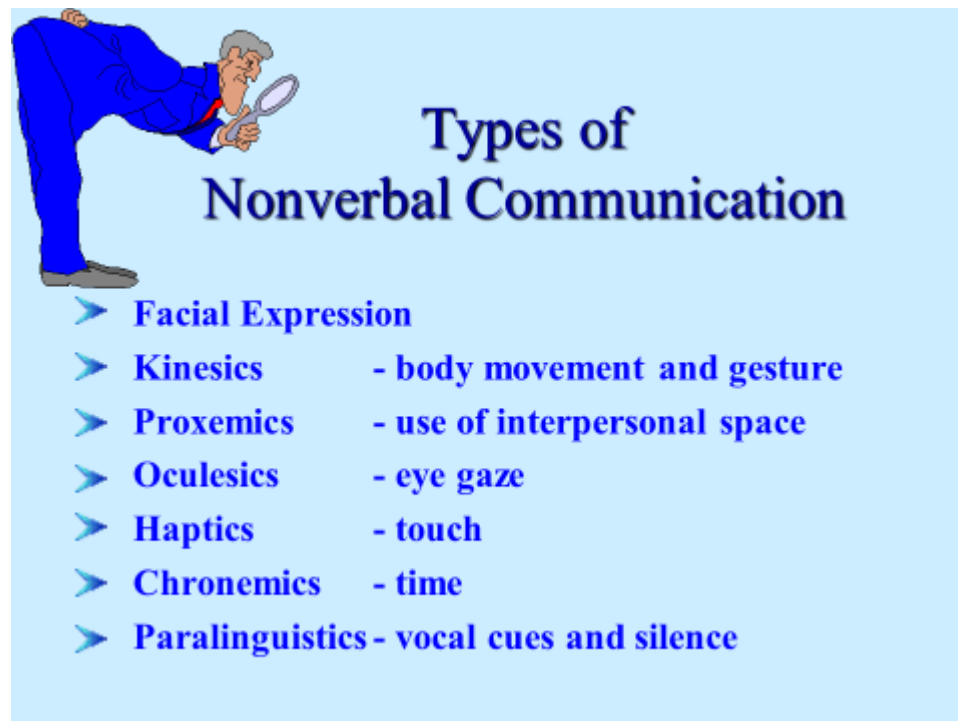
**Psychologists and Communication Theorists
Like Mehrabian and E. T. Hall**

From a functional perspective, body language is used to encode and decode communication message. How do deep sea researchers communicate underwater? It is only by functional use of nonverbal communication. We express warmth by giving warm handshakes or express coldness by giving a cold shoulder or by giving a dead fish hand shake. Once you accept that most of our socio-cultural behaviour are nurtured, it will help you to build-up your professional image as a good communicator.

Professionally speaking, your nonverbal behaviour in interviews, group discussions, public speeches, and any of your performance before an audience, can be learnt by practice and by reinforcing acceptable gestures. If your performance in the above mentioned situations is not up to the mark, then first you should video tape your behaviour, using which, seek feedback from your friends, well-wishers and professionals to help work on your negative behavior and

change it in a positive manner. This kind of exercise can also help you identify the particular type of nonverbal behavior that you weakly or strongly exhibit.

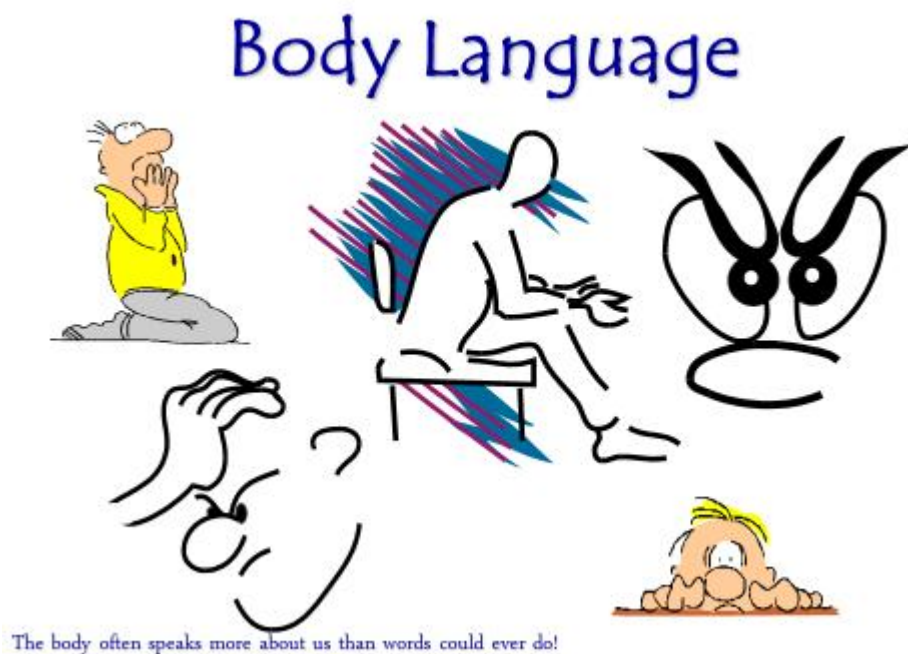
TYPES OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION



Facial expressions such as smile and frown give immense clues to emotional information. Kinesics refers to the use of body movement and gestures for communicative purposes. Proxemics is the use of interpersonal space and the psychological message we convey by it. Oculesics is with relation to eye gaze or eye contact and the minimizing or maximizing of it conveys different meanings. Haptics simply refers to touch. Chronemics is about the use of time, its sociocultural variations and its implications. Paralinguistics refers to the vocal cues including such seemingly unintentional behaviour like clearing throat and even the use of silence. I will be discussing all these types in detail in the next two lectures.

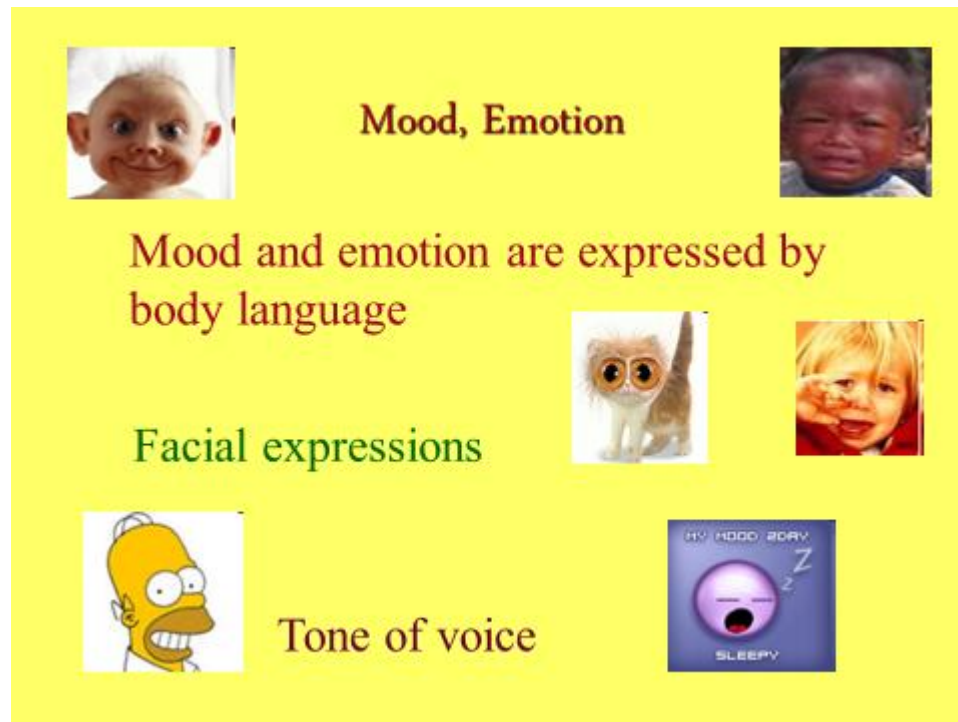
BODY LANGUAGE

Body language or the science of kinesthetics is very revealing. Watching the way people use their body movement and gestures to express themselves can bring you a lot closer to the truth than simply listening to what they say. Most of the times, people use verbal language as a cover up to their innermost thought, however, their nonverbal behavior reveals it. To put it in another manner, we can refer to body language as outward expressions of inner feelings. Look at some of the pictures which follow, they tell you stories without words!



Gesture is one part of body language and it varies from culture to culture but it can be cultivated by modifying certain sociological behaviour. Simply speaking, gesture is a movement of a limb or the body as an expression of thought or feeling. It is interesting to note that gestures have cultural background and they are learnt within the society and culture which one belongs to. Gestures either accompany spoken language or stand alone in conveying a particular message. For example, in most of the Indian culture, pointing at somebody while talking to somebody else is not considered a decent or polite gesture.

Overall, we indicate our mood and express our emotion using body language. Look at the various moods and emotion in the picture below. Without words, the idea that one is happy, sorrowful, excited, puzzled, surprised, drowsy, etc., are conveyed through body language.



VOLUNTARY BODY LANGUAGE

If you are keen on developing a professional image of body language, then you should be aware of the fact that there are two aspects to body language, namely, the voluntary and the involuntary. Voluntary body language refers to movement, gestures and postures intentionally made by the person such as smiling, shaking hands, and mirroring actions. In this case, the sender is aware of the nonverbal communication that he/she is involved in. Often, it is done intentionally and mostly to keep the receiver in a comfortable position. Interestingly, this is less commonly discussed because it seems trouble-free and uncomplicated. Most of our formalized gestures come under this category.

INVOLUNTARY BODY LANGUAGE

You should be more concerned about involuntary body language because it is intricate and an inadvertent gesture can land you into trouble. Our involuntary body movement, while we are involved in a verbal communication situation, gives cues to our observers about what we are really thinking or feeling. For instance, candidates in interviews and group discussions often make involuntary movements like playing with the pen, shirt button or key chain, shaking legs, clapping hands which reveal to the observers that they are nervous. Fascinatingly, the ability to interpret such movements may itself be unconscious, at least for inexperienced spectators. Involuntary body language is the most accurate way to decode a person's subconscious thoughts. That is why, interrogators and police officers always rely on overt and inert clues about body language. Once you understand that it is almost impossible to hide your innermost feelings, then it is better to know the negative and positive aspects body language. In this context, there are some basics and universals which carry same significance across various cultures.

BASICS AND UNIVERSALS

Crossing arms and legs, especially while standing, is considered a defensive gesture. However, understand that these are universals accepted in the European and the American culture and there could be possible deviations in the Indian culture. For instance, Swami Vivekananda's famous posture is the one with crossed hands, which exudes self-confidence in his case. Yet, when you see a girl with a folder inside her crossed arms, it is obviously a defensive gesture. Crossed arms and legs, while if you are seated, can mean that you are trying to show empathy.

Feet also play an important part in communication whether you are standing or sitting. Especially when you are attracted to someone, your feet will be pointing in their direction. If you're not interested with the person before you, the feet recede and go as back as possible depending on the level of disinterest. When women are interested in someone, they will play with a lock of hair or continually tuck their hair behind their ears.

The slides below indicate the universal body language used for openness, defensiveness, insecurity, cooperation, confidence, nervousness and frustration. A short table of nonverbal behavior and corresponding interpretation follows them.

Basics & Universals

- **Openness:** Open hands, unbuttoned coat.
- **Defensiveness:** Arms crossed, sideways glance, touching/rubbing nose, rubbing eyes, buttoned coat, drawing away.
- **Insecurity:** Pinching flesh, chewing pen, thumb over thumb, biting fingernail.
- **Cooperation:** Upper body in sprinter's position, open hands, sitting on edge of chair, hand to face gestures, unbuttoning coat.

Basics & Universals

- **Confidence:** Steepled hands, hands behind back, back stiffened, hands in coat pockets with thumb out, hands on lapels of coat.
- **Nervousness:** Clearing throat, whistling, smoking, pinching flesh, fidgeting, covering mouth, jiggling money or keys, tugging ears, wringing hands.
- **Frustration:** Short breaths, "tsk" sound, tightly clenched hands, wringing hands, fist-like gestures, rubbing hand through hair, rubbing back of neck.

NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR	INTERPRETATION
Tilted head	Interest
Stroking chin	Trying to make a decision
Looking down, face turned away	Disbelief
Biting nails	Insecurity, nervousness
Rubbing hands	Anticipation
Pulling or tugging at ear	Indecision

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NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR	INTERPRETATION
Brisk, erect walk	Confidence
Standing with hands on hips	Readiness, aggression
Sitting with legs crossed, foot kicking slightly	Boredom
Sitting, legs apart	Open, relaxed
Arms crossed on chest	Defensiveness
Walking with hands in pockets, shoulders hunched	Dejection

NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR	INTERPRETATION
Sitting with hands clasped behind head, legs crossed	Confidence, superiority
Open palm	Sincerity, openness, innocence
Pinching bridge of nose, eyes closed	Negative evaluation
Tapping or drumming fingers	Impatience
Steepling fingers	Authoritative
Patting/fondling/rubbing hair	Lack of self-confidence; insecurity

Now that you have got some basic idea about our nonverbal behaviour and corresponding interpretation, in the next lecture, we can look at each of the types of nonverbal communication as expressed through our body language.

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