

Actions Speak Louder Than Words: A Study in Body Language

Morgan Furbee

University of North Georgia

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS:
A STUDY IN BODY LANGUAGE

Abstract

Throughout this study, the nature and connotations of non-verbal communication are explored in detail as well as applied to prominent, linguistic theories. Body language, a broad but versatile concept, is severely neglected as a form of human communication. Culture and universal human qualities are an essential theme as the concept of body language is applied in multiple contexts. As the differing gender categories are only briefly mentioned, they are narrowed strictly to men and women. It is necessary to understand and apply the knowledge about the complexities of body language to further develop human connection.

Introduction

Communication among human beings is not merely narrowed to the oral transmission of thought, but may even be expanded to include unspoken conversation. According to Anders (2015), “body language... can account for more than 65 percent of human communication” as humans “draw from sight (83 percent)... to understand the message being sent” (p. 82).

Richmond and McCrosky project that “... nonverbal communication is believed to play a more affective, relational, or emotional role” (as cited in Meadors & Murray, 2014, p. 211). Body language, a complex non-verbal communication system, transcends societal boundaries as it accurately provides authenticity in social interactions, further insinuating emotional intention.

General Information

According to Mandal (2014), “nonverbal behavior includes all communicative acts except speech” (p. 1). Similarly, body language is not limited to blatant hand signals, but may also be conveyed through “bodily contact, posture, (general) physical appearance, and... gaze” (Mandal, 2014, p. 2). Each human being, despite his race, culture or belief system, may be unified in the commonality of physical tells regarding emotion. How individuals present themselves to another alludes to the deeper, personal motives within. Linguistic research must be expanded past the archaic assumption that communication only forms out of speech or the written word. Karadag et al. (2008) argues, “People continuously forward messages mutually without speech and writing” (p. 397). The human body is constantly relaying messages whether or not the individual is aware of the fact that such communication is occurring. Although hand motions are often crucial to relay the centralized intent of body language, it is also “facial muscles, (and) shoulders... (that) function as a tool for communication” (Karadag et al. 2008, p. 397). Facial expressions are one of the clearest methods of deducing an emotional state. Meaning

is expressed “55 percent from facial expressions” alone (Anders, 2015, p. 82). It is necessary to understand the complicated nature of body language, rather than reinforcing inaccurate assumptions concerning its true essence.

Uses of Body Language

Non-spoken communication plays an active role in conversation as ideas and intentions may still be transmitted silently. This muted form of "speaking" is conveyed through body language. According to Mandal (2014), the use of such "nonverbal acts" operates in "speech and function for emphasis" (p. 418). Çalışkan and Yeşil claim that body language may "support verbal language" as well as convey an accurate visualization of ideas through personal expression (as cited in Karadag et al., 2008, p. 397).

Body language is a more reliable and authentic form of relaying information than verbal communication. Richmond and McCrosky project the favored belief that "nonverbal content more accurately reflects the true feelings of the communicator and the intent of the message" (as cited in Meaders & Murray, 2014, p. 211). Spoken words may be deceptively fabricated while physical behavior channels unfiltered beliefs and opinions. This subliminal display of truth, a "physical feature" that "reflect(s) the inner-self directly", is due to the "spontaneous" nature of such "physical responses" (Karadag et al., 2008, p. 397). Immediate reaction is more difficult to control or simulate than premeditated action.

Karadag et al. (2008) claims that the “verbal to visual messages are being transferred between respondents consciously or unconsciously” (p. 397). These styles of messaging contribute to the overall “structure, quality, contents and productivity of the” conversation (Karadag et al. 2008, p. 397). According to Anders (2015), the way in which humans interact “is interpreted through an internal filter composed of history, past experiences, education, bias,

context, culture, expectations and... goals” (p. 82). This personal perception affects the transfer of information between communicators. Just as body language arises out of culture and innate human emotions, stereotyping also emerges from the human consciousness. According to Meadors & Murray (2014), “... these stereotypes might be perpetuated implicitly throughout culture” (p. 212). Expressions of body language are not stereotypical in themselves, but are rather able to “uncover implicit biases that can be measured via a taxonomy of nonverbal behaviors” (Meadors & Murray, 2014, p. 212). According to Meadors and Murray (2014), “results indicate that biases in attitudes and beliefs might be reliably detected and measured (specifically) through body language” (p. 209). Meadors and Murray (2014) insist that body language is an invaluable tool in “reveal(ing) more subtle forms of prejudice” (p. 209) as “people still engage in the more subtle methods of discrimination” (p. 210).

Culture

Body language possesses the unparalleled ability to accurately represent the complex nature of human emotion through simplified or minimal physical movements. Certain movements of the body coincide with particular words "for displaying the feelings" experienced at that time (Mandal, 2014, p. 418). According to Karadag et al. (2008), "every human betrays his emotional state and ideas through body language" (p. 397). Therefore, body language is not a unique quality of certain societies but rather a communicative phenomenon that is represented in each human culture. Mandal (2014) supports this observation with the claim that "people in all cultures use nonverbal communication" (p. 419). However, he further categorizes the often detailed nature of body language as an expression of a specific culture rather than a uniform assessment across all cultures (Mandal, 2014, p. 419). Proper expressions or movements that insinuate intent "in a particular context for a particular purpose is predetermined in a specific

culture" (Mandal, 2014, p. 418). Although the emotions behind such expressions may be universally shared, the actual actions vary from culture to culture. While a head nod may insinuate positive conformation, this is not always true in all locations. Adaptability is as necessary when it comes to understanding the communication system of body language as it is when studying a foreign language.

Difficulty arises when attempting to distinguish the initial relationship between body language and culture. While some “contemporary scientists propose that nonverbal communication is influential in establishing the thoughts and behaviors that are considered to be consistent with cultural beliefs” (Meadors & Murray, 2014, p. 210), this merely provides an influence rather than an original source. Instead, the same emotions expressed worldwide shape the manifestation of body language within culture. This is evident as ““Cross-cultural similarities and substantial differences in body language exist in the extent of the body language use and interpretation” (Mandal, 2014, p. 419). As body language originates from internal emotion it is natural that there will initially be similarities. Yet, as cultures develop and expand, they later evolve into differing communities with diverse expressions.

Miscommunications and Misunderstandings

Due to the evolution of body language across cultures, misinterpretations are common among communicators. Although a highly reliable way of detecting authenticity in communication, body language is not a flawless form of transmitting thoughts as it may be misperceived. According to Meadors and Murray (2014), “...inconsistency between explicit and implicit attitudes directly contributes to miscommunications” (p. 211). While “touch communicates distinct emotions between humans”, intent may still be mistaken (Hertenstein & Keltner, 2010, p. 70). Physical contact of any kind “is a rich medium of social exchange” with

powerful connotations (Hertenstein & Keltner, 2010, p. 70). It is necessary to understand the underlying emotions whether it is love, anger, or commiseration, to accurately interpret the intentions of those involved. According to Hertenstein and Keltner (2010), human touch “is likely to be a highly gendered form of human communication” (p. 70). Miscommunications occur between every individual, but they are especially common between men and women. However, these discrepancies arise from interpretation rather than original intent. The study conducted by Hertenstein and Keltner (2010) “observed no gender-related differences in the communication of disgust, fear, envy, embarrassment, sadness, pride, love, and gratitude” (p. 76). While both men and women are capable of experiencing the emotion of love, their perception of a physical touch at a certain time may be mistaken. According to Hall (1978) and McClure (2000), “... there is a general tendency for women to be more successful than men at decoding nonverbal cues” (p. 353), as “men also showed a relative insensitivity to nonverbal cues” (As cited in Farris et al. 2008, p. 352). Rather, the misinterpretations occur through the expression of body language.

Sapir-Whorf

Human systems of communication are not man-made concepts but are rather “internalized in the process of becoming human” (Mandal, 2014, p. 418). Language expresses thought, particularly in regards to human emotion. Meadors and Murray (2014) explore the notion of “universally recognized emotion” with the deviating physical signals according to particular cultures (p. 212). Both body language and diverse verbal languages attempt to convey the same internalized concepts, yet the ideas may be unintentionally yet unavoidably altered during translation.

Body language deviates from typical associations with archetypal human communication as it is non-verbal, yet it is still clearly a communicative representation of the depth and range of human insight. While the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis deals strictly with speech, it is necessary and enlightening to consider body language through such a lens. According to Fromkin (2011), the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis may be defined as “the proposition that the structure of a language influences how its speaker perceives the world around them” (p. 592). Currently, body language neither supports nor challenges the claims of such a hypothesis, but it is merely applied. Implementing the concept of body language within the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, rather than solely verbal styles of communication, expands the possibilities of such an idea. Therefore, body language, ultimately the embodiment of human emotion, also possesses the ability to shape reality. Just as “significant elements of speech are symbolic of the (theoretical) concepts”, communicative body gestures convey deeper intentions (Carnes, 2014, p. 263). Carnes (2014) states with Sapir’s hypothesis that language merely “influences” thought (p. 266), and such abstract concepts are potential constructors of reality (p. 263). A complication forms when applying the concept of body language to such a statement. Body language is thought or emotion influencing physical expression, while Sapir insists upon the notion that it is thought that is being influenced by language. Whorf contributes greater effect to the abilities of communication by describing “language as the prime determinant of our conception” of reality (Carnes, 2014, p. 266). In this case, man’s perceptions of reality are contrived out of his system of language whether verbal or nonverbal. Yet body language conflicts again when compared to a suggestion posed by Whorf as he claims, “the differences between language systems is such that each language both stimulates different thought” (Carnes, 2014, p. 269). This contradicts with the ability of body language to cross the confines of culture as every human being experiences

equivalent emotion. The complexities of comparing these two linguistic focuses increases the necessity for more research and application to understand the full range of opportunities regarding body language.

Conclusion

Body language expands current understandings of human communication as well as the opportunities for diverse interactions. Although this form of nonverbal communication may possess some flaws regarding reception, communication through body language still provides an accurate and enlightening perception into the depth of human emotion. Its credible position in the field of linguistics requires further research as body language “serves an important role in communication and shows the evolution of humans from animals” (Mandal, 2014, p. 420). The complex range of human emotion is most accessible through the intuitive and observant nature of body language.

References

- Anders, S. (2015). What Are You Really Saying? *Physician Leadership Journal*, 2(2), 82-83.
- Carnes, R. L. (2014). A Perceptual Model of the Whorfian Thesis. *etc: A Review Of General Semantics*, 71(3), 263-271.
- Farris, C., Treat, T. A., Viken, R. J., & McFall, R. M. (2008). Perceptual Mechanisms That Characterize Gender Differences in Decoding Women's Sexual Intent.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hyams, N. (2011). *An Introduction to Language* (9th ed.). New York.
- Karadag, E., Caliskan, N., & Yesil, R. (2008). Developing the Evaluation Scale to Determine the Impact of Body Language in an Argument: Reliability & Validity Analysis.
- Mandal, F. B. (2014). Nonverbal Communication in Humans. *Journal of Human Behavior In The Social Environment*, 24(4), 417-421.
- Meadors, J. D., & Murray, C. B. (2014). Measuring Nonverbal Bias through Body Language Responses to Stereotypes. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 38(2), 209-229.