

# Body Language: An Effective Communication Tool

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Body Language is a significant aspect of modern communications and relationships. Body language describes the method of communicating using body movements or gestures instead of, or in addition to, verbal language. The interpretation of body language, such as **facial expressions and gestures, is formally called kinesics.** Body language includes subtle, unconscious movements, including winking and slight movements of the eyebrows and other facial expressions.

## 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 conveying of ideas, thoughts, feelings, and attitude both verbally and nonverbally.** There are two major forms of communication: verbal and nonverbal—verbal refers to words and **nonverbal refers to all communication that occurs by means of body movements.** Body language is also referred to as nonverbal communication—an important

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communication tool which can constitute 50% or more of what we are communicating to other people. There are two broad types of body language: open body language and closed body language. Some body language theorists say that these are very old behaviors which date back to our early ancestors. By maintaining open body language, our ancestors showed that they had no concealed weapons hidden behind their back, their armpits or in their hands. By opening our hands, unfolding our arms and bodies we still show that we mean the other person no harm. When we have closed body language, we appear to be physically showing that we are hiding something from the other person and this can be threatening to them. These messages are often received subconsciously by the other person who starts to distrust our words and what we mean by them. An open manner is a good start to an open, frank conversation.

Different researches were carried out on the role of body language and it has been reported that during communication: (1) only 7% of the information human transmits to others is in the language we use; (2) 38% in how people speak—quality of voice, accent, voice projection, emphasis, expression, pace, volume, pitch, etc.; and (3) 55% through body language—posture, position, eye contact, facial expression, head and body movements, gestures, touch, etc.

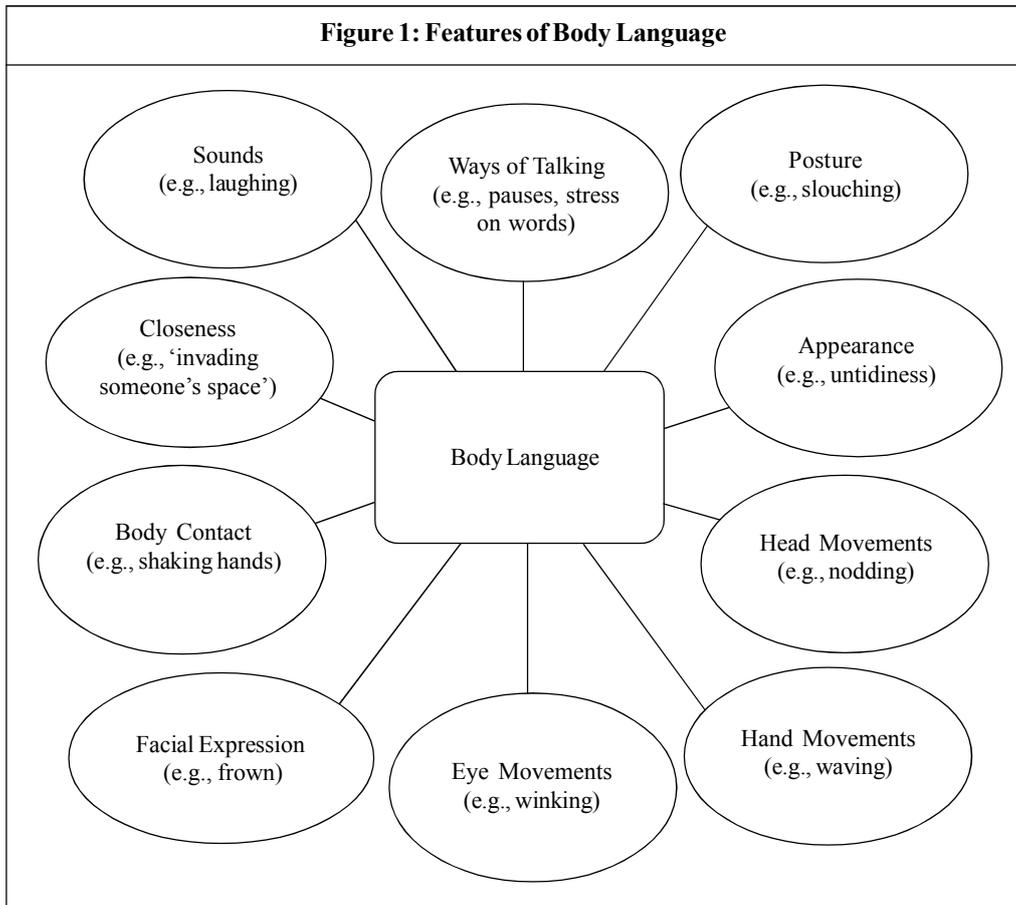
### **Body Language Analysis**

Body language is instinctively interpreted by us all to a limited degree, but the subject is potentially immensely complex, and perhaps infinitely so, given that the human body is said to be capable of producing 700,000 different movements (Hartland and Tosh, 2001). As with other behavioral sciences, the study of body language benefitted from the development of brain-imaging technology in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This dramatically accelerated the research and understanding of the connections between the brain, feelings and thoughts, and body movement. We should expect to see this effort continuing and providing more solid science for body language theory, much of which remains empirical, i.e., based on experience and observation, rather than scientific test. Given the potential for confusion, here are some considerations when analyzing body language. Figure 1 represents the important features of body language.

### **Facial Expression**

Facial expressions are dynamic features which communicate the speaker's attitude, emotions, intentions and so on. The face is the primary source of emotions. During oral communication, facial expressions change continually and are constantly monitored and interpreted by the receiver. Examples are: a smile, frown, raised eyebrow, yawn or sneer.

Face is the index of the mind. We say, “she put on a long face” to mean that she was not in the best of her moods. However much one tries, his hidden feeling of anger, fear, confusion, uncertainty, enthusiasm and joy will get revealed by the facial expression. Sometimes, the words that you utter may be contradicted by your facial expression. A teacher might ask the student if he understood the idea, but he need not wait for an



answer. A lackluster bewildered facial expression would reveal that the student has not grasped anything.

### **Eye Contact**

Eye movement is a key part of facial behavior because the eyes are invariably involved in facial displays. The different forms are observed to be cross-cultural. The frequency of eye contact may suggest either interest or boredom or may even betray dishonesty. The direct stare of the speaker can show candor or openness. Downward glances are generally associated with modesty; eyes rolled upwards are a sign of fatigue. Researchers have discovered that certain facial areas reveal our emotional state better than others. For example, the eyes tend to show happiness, sadness or even surprise. The lower part of the face can also express happiness or surprise; a smile, for instance, can communicate friendliness or cooperation; and brows and forehead could reveal anger.

### **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**

Body posture is the bearing or the position of the speaker's body. It is a more or less stable state and thus not to be confused with body gestures which are movements. Body posture can be characteristic and assumed for a special purpose or it can correspond to the normal expectations in the context of a particular situation. Obviously, one can be lying down, sitting, or standing. Normally, these are not the elements of posture that convey messages. However, when the speaker is slouched or erect, his or her legs crossed or arms folded, such postures convey a degree of formality or relaxation. Once more, they can also transfer symbolic messages on the orator's attitude or intention with regard to the message. It is good to adopt a flexible erect posture rather than a stiff or slouching posture. Drooping shoulders, sagging in the seat, etc. reveal a feeling of depression and lack of interest.

### **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.

### **Head Motion**

The movement of the head plays an important role in oral communication. No one is expected to keep on shaking his head, but appropriate nods and shakes of the head enhance the level of communication.

## 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

Communicating through touch is another important nonverbal behavior. There has been a substantial amount of research on the importance of touch in infancy and early childhood. Harry Harlow’s classic monkey study demonstrated how the deprivation of touch and contact impedes development. Baby monkeys raised by wire mothers experienced permanent deficits in behavior and social interaction. **Touch can be used to communicate affection or familiarity.**

## Appearance

Our choice of color, clothing, hairstyles and other factors affecting appearance are also considered a means of nonverbal communication. **Research on color psychology has demonstrated that different colors can evoke different moods.** Appearance can also alter physiological reactions, judgments and interpretations. Just think of all the subtle judgments you quickly make about someone based on his or her appearance. These first impressions are important, which is why experts suggest that job-seekers dress appropriately for interviews with potential employers.

Body language can be studied **elaborately under kinesics** which makes a scientific and analytic study of the subject. Oral communication takes place in face-to-face or one-to-one situation or when a speaker addresses an audience. The audience may be small as in a group discussion or large as in the case of some business meetings. In all these situations, body language plays an important role.

## 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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