



প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed Indexed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

Published by: Dept. of Bengali

Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <https://www.thecho.in>

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Significance of Nonverbal Communication in Efficacious Professional Presentation

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Abstract

Nonverbal communication is the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless (mostly visual) cues between people. It is equally important like verbal skills for efficient and effective communication. It is sometimes mistakenly referred to as body language (kinesics). But nonverbal communication encompasses much more, such as use of voice (paralanguage), touch (haptics), distance (proxemics), and physical environments. It is often said that the manner one delivers a speech has the ability to capture the interest of the audience on the desired subject. Nonverbal communication thus has a vital role to play in the delivery of any presentation. It is due to our unconscious use of some nonverbal means that the audience can decode our behavioural patterns. In reality, the personality development factors such as nervousness, weakness, lack of confidence, over-confidence etc. can be better evaluated by decoding the nonverbal means of communication. It is, therefore, advantageous to use proper nonverbal means of communication during any presentation, as one's personality is an overall culmination of both spoken and behavioural languages. This paper of mine is an attempt to examine how the presentation process is greatly influenced by proper use of nonverbal communication and thereby suggesting some remedial measures to avoid negative means of nonverbal communication.

Key Words: Nonverbal communication, Kinesics, Haptics, Proxemics.

Introduction: Communication, in general, is the process of sending and receiving messages that enable humans to share knowledge, attitudes and skills. Although we usually identify communication with speech, communication is composed of two dimensions-verbal and nonverbal. Nonverbal communication has been defined as communication without words. It includes apparent behaviours such as facial expressions, eye contact, touching and tone of voice, as well as obvious messages such as dress, posture and spatial distance between two or more people. It seems queer how anyone can communicate without the use of words or speech. If we turn back to history, we find that human beings, before the introduction of words, used to express their feelings by gestures and postures. They used their body to communicate. They gritted their teeth to show anger, grinned to display their happiness and touched one another to exhibit affection. All these are different means of nonverbal communication that has an important role to play during any presentation.

Research suggest that only 5% effect is produced by the spoken words, 45% by the tone and other elements of voice, and 50% by body language, movements, eye contact, etc.

Thus, nonverbal communication occupies an important place in any presentation. This paper of mine is an attempt to discuss in detail the various categories of nonverbal means of communication that we use during any presentation. Indrajit Bhattacharya in his “*An Approach to Communication Skills*” has defined nonverbal communication as-“Nonverbal communication is a communication through one's body language and environment referring to all external stimuli and external

manifestations other than spoken or written words that include body movement, characteristics of physical appearance, the voice quality and use of space distancing.” (Bhattacharya: p.14).

Before going in details about the significance of nonverbal means of communication, it will be reasonable to define the term “professional presentation.” Nitin Bhatnagar and Mamta Bhatnagar in their book “*Communicative English for Engineers and Professionals*” describes it as kind of an oral talk. According to them-“A professional presentation is a kind of an oral talk delivered by a speaker to a group of audience. It is formal in nature, communicated with a specific purpose, usually with the help of some audio visual aids. . Interaction in presentation takes place in the form of a brief question-answer session in which the speaker satisfies queries of the audience.” They commented that professional presentations, generally in use, are seminars, presentations during meetings and conferences, research paper presentations, product marketing, university/ institution/ department/ company profile presentations, academic presentations, workshops and recruitment presentations.

To be an efficient presenter, one has to be well acquainted in different categories of nonverbal means of communication apart from other necessary steps of verbal communication like audience awareness, choosing the right topic, organizing the data, use of visual aids, etc. However, this paper concentrates mainly on the nonverbal skills rather than the verbal ones.

Nonverbal communication can be grouped in to the following categories.

- Kinesics
- Proxemics
- Chronemics
- Para Linguistic Features
- Haptics

Kinesics: Kinesics was first used (in 1952) by Ray Birdwhistell, an anthropologist who wished to study how people communicate through posture, gesture, stance, and movement. His ideas over several decades were synthesized and resulted in the book, *Kinesics and Context*. Interest in kinesics specifically and nonverbal behavior generally was popularized during the late 1960s and early 1970s, through such popular mass market (definitely not academic) publications as *How to Read a Person Like a Book*. Part of Birdwhistell's work involved filming people in social situations and analysing them to show elements of communication not clearly seen otherwise. According to Birdwhistell, kinesics is the science that analyses the movement of bodily organs. He observed that no movement of the body is out of meaning. None are accidental. Body language can reveal the idiosyncrasies of a person. It consists of personal appearance, eyes, facial expression, gestures and postures. A brief analysis of these factors are discussed below:

1. Personal Appearance: Personal appearance plays an important role in efficacious presentation. Just like we adapt our language to the audience, we should also dress appropriately. Appearance includes clothes, hair, accessories, cosmetics, and so on. Clothes also accentuate the body's movements, and the choice of clothes reveals a lot about the wearer's personality and attitude. It is important that we select a dress that is neatly washed, properly ironed and fits us well. Being properly dressed does not mean being fashionably or glamorously dressed. One's appearance may put the audience into a resistant or hostile attitude or induce in them a receptive mood. So, it is very much necessary to make our personality appealing with a little care and a sense of presentation.

2. Posture: Posture generally refers to the way we hold ourselves when we sit, stand or carry ourselves. Our posture communicates the way we visualize the world around us. A presenter need to cultivate and maintain elegance in his/ her posture to make the presentation effective. To make the best impression possible, one should try to use the right posture as stated by Sanjay Kumar and Pushp Lata in *Communication Skills* as follows:

- Look straight while walking.
- Avoid being too slow or aggressively fast while walking up to the podium or dais.
- Avoid crossing legs while sitting or standing before audience.
- Avoid leaning on the lectern or reclining against the back of the chair.
- Avoid keeping your feet at attention or parallel.
- Don't let your shoulders droop.
- Don't slouch while walking or sprawl while sitting.

These are some important tips, following which one can maintain an impressive posture during professional meetings, interviews, group discussions, presentations and other formal occasions.

3. **Gestures:** Gesture implies the movements of other parts of our body, except face and eyes like hands, arms, head, and shoulders. Gestures are quite essential during presentation. Through proper practice we can use appropriate gestures in speaking, gestures do add meaning to the message but they may turn awkward if not used properly.

Sarmah et al. in *Communication skills for Engineers and Scientists*, mentioned about the different types of gestures along with their meaning and affects. For example, looking at the watch frequently – indicates restlessness, looking at the roof (unable to face the crowd), playing with the buttons of the shirt –(unease), biting nails- (nervousness), cracking knuckles- (reluctance), wiping forehead-(unease), etc. are negative gestures which should be avoided as far as possible. Again leaning towards the listener- (enthusiasm), nodding head at times- (agreeing), etc. are positive gestures and should be practiced.

4. **Facial expression:** Along with postures and gestures, facial expressions also play an important part in nonverbal communication. The face is the most expressive part of our body. A smile stands for friendliness, a frown for discontent, raised eyebrows for disbelief, tightened jaw muscles for antagonism. Facial expressions are subtle and difficult to interpret. They can be used in a variety of ways to aid, inhibit, or complement communication. Though there are only six basic expressions, there can be many shades and blends of these. Also people tend to hide their true feelings, and project expressions that are appropriate according to the circumstances. The six basic facial expressions according to Meenakshi and Sangeeta Raman in their joint effort in “*Technical Communication*” are-happiness; surprise; disgust; fear; anger and sadness.

5. **Eye Contact:** In any presentation, eyes play a very significant role. Avoiding eye contact is seen as an indication of evasion, doubt, fear, vulnerability, inadequacy, and confusion. It is said that one’s eyes mirror one’s heart and conceal one’s mind. Eye contact is a direct and powerful form of nonverbal communication. While making a presentation, looking directly at listeners build rapport. Prolonging the eye contact for three to five seconds tells the audience that the presenter is sincere in what he/ she says and that he/ she wants us to pay attention. Nobody likes a speaker who engages himself/ herself in his/ her notes or is lost behind the screen. Eye-contact reveals the speaker’s identity and helps him/ her in getting over his/ her self-consciousness. Our upper eyelids and eyebrows help us convey an intricate array of nonverbal messages. Eye contact shows one’s intensity and elicits a feeling of trust. It is advisable to avoid gazing unnecessarily and restrict some negative movements of the eye. Eye-brows with upper and lower eye-lids raised combine with dilated pupils- tell us that the person is excited, surprised or frightened. Again the eye-brows with upper and lower eye –lids closed, combine with constricted pupils, will tell us that the person is angry. Brief eye contact generally reveals embarrassment, timidity or nervousness. A direct look conveys candour and openness. This direct and powerful form is a signal of confidence or sincerity; therefore experienced presenters maintain longer eye contact.

Proxemics: Proxemics is one of several subcategories of the study of nonverbal communication, other being haptics, kinesics, vocalic and chronemics. Proxemics can be defined as "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture". Edward T Hall, the cultural anthropologist who coined the term in 1963, emphasized the impact of proxemics behaviour (the use of space) on interpersonal communication. Hall believed that the value in studying proxemics comes from its applicability in evaluating not only the way people interact with others in daily life, but also "the organization of space in [their] houses and buildings, and ultimately the layout of [their] towns. In simple terms, it is the study of nearness or distance in a communication scenario. Hall divides space into four distinct zones associated with communication:

- **Intimate Zone-**This zone starts with personal touch and extends just to 18 inches. Members of the family, lovers, spouses, relatives and parents fall under this zone. This zone does not need

active conversation. One can whisper or make unintelligible sounds but still be able to communicate. A handshake, a pat on the back, or a hug, all come into this zone.

- **Personal Zone**-This zone stretches from 18 inches to 4 feet. Close friends, colleagues, peers, etc. fall into this zone. There can be normal conversation instead of whispering sounds. This zone permits spontaneous and unplanned communication.
- **Social Zone**-Social events take place in the radius of 4 to 12 feet. In this zone, relationships are more formal and official. People are more cautious in their movements. These situations involve less emotion and more planning.
- **Public Zone**-This zone starts from 12 feet and may extend to 25 feet or to the range of eye sight and hearing. Events that take place in this zone are formal. Here, the audience views what is happening as an impartial observer. The degree of detachment is very high. Public leaders have to maintain this distance for security reasons.

Chronemics: Chronemics is the study of the use of time in nonverbal communication. The way that one perceives and values time, structures time and reacts to time frames communication. Across cultures, time perception plays a large role in the nonverbal communication process. Time perceptions include punctuality, willingness to wait and interactions. The use of time can affect lifestyle, daily agendas, speed of speech, movements and how long people are willing to listen. Time can be used as an indicator of status. For example, in most companies the boss can interrupt progress to hold an impromptu meeting in the middle of the work day, yet the average worker would have to make an appointment to see the boss. The way different cultures perceive time can influence communication as well. Cultures are sometimes considered *monochronic* or *polychronic*.

A monochronic time system means that things are done one at a time and time is segmented into precise, small units. Under this system time is scheduled, arranged and managed.

A polychronic time system is a system where several things can be done at once, and a more fluid approach is taken to scheduling time.

Para Linguistic Features: The word “para” means “like”. “Para linguistic” generally means “like language” and is a part of nonverbal communication where the focus is on understanding the rate of speech, volume, pitch, pauses, rhythm, quality and pacing. Though we cannot radically change our voice, there are different aspects of voice which can be carefully worked on to create the right type of impact on our listeners while we deliver a speech, make a presentation, participate in a group discussion, or appear for a job interview.

Paralinguistic features include pauses and insertions such as ‘oh’, ‘uh’, ‘you know’ etc., since these signal our meaning too. A careful presenter reaps the advantages of these paralinguistic features, which a casual speaker ignores.

Haptics: It is related to the study of touch behaviour in communication. Though it is an important means of showing intimacy, warmth, comfort, discomfort, etc. sometimes touching may have the possibility to be misinterpreted. As a speaker, it is always advantageous not to touch the audience and maintaining a proper distance.

All the above mentioned nonverbal skills have to be used properly to be an efficient and effective presenter along with other verbal skills. Even though one can speak fluently, one’s presentation will not be well received by the audience because of the misuse of these nonverbal skills. Many people unconsciously misuse the nonverbal skills of communication due to ignorance. But a proper understanding of these will help them to avoid the negative aspects of body language. It is well acclaimed that practice makes a man perfect. It is through regular and systematic practice that one can rectify negative aspects and acquire the positive ones. Being a faculty member of *The Assam Kaziranga University, Jorhat, Assam, (Established in 2012)*, I had found that many of the students who are pursuing B.Tech. program, use some common body languages which negatively affects their presentation. Certain negative aspects of their body language are listed below along with their implications and proper way of using them.

Negative aspects of body language	Implications	Proper way of using body language
Putting hands inside the pocket	Nervousness	Standing on both foot keeping the hands straight and out of pocket
Touching the nose with hands	Indicating lies	Keeping hands in the right position
Hands over mouth	Uncertainty	Keeping hands in the right position
Arms crossed	Defence	Keeping hands in the right position
Stirring either the right or left leg	Restlessness	Standing with feet slightly apart
Looking down	Uneasiness or Reluctant to speak	Proper eye-contact with the audience
Raising of eye-brows with a frown	Confusion/ Uncertainty	Natural look and smiling face
Leaning on the lectern	Timidity / laziness	Standing in the proper way
Remaining silent for some time.	Cramming/ miss conception	Being fluent in speaking
Trembling while speaking	Lack of confidence/ Nervousness	Considering audience as friends

Though there are many other negative gestures, postures, facial expressions, etc. which the students use during presentation, these are frequently used by almost 70% of the students. Lack of proper understanding and ignorance of these gestures and postures might prompt the students to misuse them. After a proper comprehension of the implications of different body languages, they will be able to use them in an appropriate manner in any professional presentation.

Conclusion: The ability to deliver an efficacious professional presentation is essential for all of us. We should know how to present our ideas in a persuasive way, how to capture the attention of the audience and how to reflect confidence while making a delivery. Appropriate knowledge in the use of nonverbal skills is essential to one’s acquiring effectiveness in communication. To some extent, efficiency in the use of these skills, can make up for the lapses and inadequacies, one has in verbal communication. In some advanced countries, a well-written presentation if delivered with a manner that does not suit the occasion or in a mood that is not pleasant; the impact is bound to be negative. For all these we need to use proper nonverbal means of communication by avoiding the negative gesture, postures, etc. We should concentrate both on the manner as well as matter of presentation in order to make it effective and maintain a lasting rapport before the audience.

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