



Kinesics: A Neural Aspect of the Brain

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ABSTRACT:

Study of kinesics or body language has gained focus of psychologists and scholars in the current times and it has been put forth that a language should not be studied in isolation, it ought to be grasped along with the non-verbal messages that are culturally associated with it. The focus of the present paper is to study body language and its various aspects as an important part of non-verbal communication, to explore the cultural variety in body signals and to discuss the ways to develop a positive body language among the learners of communication skills in English.

1. Introduction

Charles Darwin, in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, wrote, “The power of communication between the members of the same tribe by means of language has been of paramount importance in the development of man; and the course of language is much aided by the expressive movements of the face and the body”(408). The book, first published in 1872 was an immediate best seller and still provides researches into emotions and facial expressions. Darwin was right, although as a nineteenth century thinker, he might not have taken the notion of communication as seriously as we do today in twenty first century, because his main emphasis was probably on inheritance. Man is a social animal and isolation is not natural to him. He tries to keep in touch with the fellow beings through interpersonal communications. People are sometimes found talking to

their pets in solitude. The interpersonal communication has a lot of subliminal varieties that are not easy to interpret. On paper words are static, punctuation marks are used, but in face to face conversation message is conveyed at two levels simultaneously- verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication is an essential part of non-verbal communication but non-verbal communication can take place together with verbal communication as well as alone. Often words are inadequate to convey oral messages, and this inadequacy is supplemented and reinforced by the use of non-verbal features. These elements can be written in the form of graphics, pictures, maps, charts and diagrams or can have an unwritten form, which in a wider sense is referred to as body language. The spotlight of the present paper is to study kinesics and its various features as a significant part of non-verbal interaction, to explore the cultural varieties of body signals and to



confer upon the ways to build up positive body language.

Language and Body Language

Study of any language would be incomplete without its association with the kinesics associated to that language. “A limitation emerges about experimental protocols which studied language in isolation, without considering the complexity of social communication. In other words, language should be considered always in relation to some backgrounds of a person mood, emotions, actions and events from which the things we are saying derive their meanings” (*Front Psychol.*,2019). However, as the inmates of the twenty first century, specially the teachers of communication skills in English, we would react by saying that this so called residue exposes a level of communication of unparallel richness and variety, one in which humans express their true meaning. Jonathan Miller of Old Vic Theatre, London, in one of his highly intellectual Darwin College Lectures, has commented that the very idea of “. . . an articulate language is a barrier. . . and that if only this barrier could be removed, human beings would revert to golden age of wordless, heart felt communication”(113). This part of “Wordless, heart felt communication” was perhaps lost during the evolution of man and in the shifting of the preference from the non-verbal to the verbal communication. Scientifically speaking the answer seems to lie somewhere in the recent right-brain left-brain studies. Miller refers to it as an assumption, “. . . the verbal capabilities of the left cerebral hemisphere have been over developed by a culture which puts too much emphasis on linguistic finesse” (113) and “. . . right

hemisphere has been dangerously neglected as a consequence” (114). The left and the right hemispheres, ideally should work in collaboration with each other.

Man is born with the art of speech. Not only human beings but animals also communicate through cries, yawns, wagging of tails etc. During the early dawn of history, both used to communicate through their bodies and probably were undeclared teachers of non-verbal interaction for each other. Nature has gifted human beings with the body that has a surprising versatility of expression. It keeps on communicating endlessly, round the clock, with an infinite variety of abstract signals, that too without getting tired. Even while sleeping, body seems to convey a lot through sleeping postures, position of eyelids, snoring etc, which may indicate the physical and mental state of the person.

The language of body is of utmost importance for both the speaker and the listener. Although the most part of non-verbal communication is involuntary, it accounts for a larger part of the total message than the words. Communication experts seem to agree on this point. Dr. Lesikar, Professor, University of Texas and an international authority in the field of business communication, has reported, “Much of what we send to others without using words is sent through the physical movements of our bodies” (435). A research done by Albert Mehrabin, Professor Emeritus in psychology at UCLA, reports that words are only 7%, voice tonality 38% and body language 55% (Online: “Six Reasons”. positivityblog.com.). The numbers may vary depending upon the situation and the theme, however, it seems obvious that



body language has the lion's share and is of high importance in communication.

Most part of body signals are involuntary and are exhibited unconsciously. They are much responsible for the quality of our communication because there has to be a co-ordination between the verbal and the non-verbal signals. Therefore, one should become aware of one's body language and should learn to understand that of others as well. However, here comes a caution from, Dr. Shalini Verma, a well known Indian expert on body language and a columnist on communication, "...body language depends on the situation, on the culture, the relationship...the gender of the other person....If you don't take this into account you may get yourself into some serious trouble" (2). Body language gives listeners important clues about thoughts and feelings of a speaker, confirming or contradicting the words he/she speaks. We achieve complete communication when our body works with our ideas. Body language should not be considered in isolation rather it should be taken in broader perspective of personal appearance and grooming, posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, power of voice and speech, pace, pause and rhythm, pitch etc. A study of the following aspects of body language can help us to have a deeper understanding of non-verbal communication.

Aspects of Body Language

Appearance is part and parcel of the message that we transmit to the listeners. As the saying goes, first impression remains the lasting impression and the first thing we communicate about ourselves is through our appearance. This impression is created even before we open our mouth to

start conversation. Once we start speaking the person comes to know about our knowledge, skills and attitude. Although it may sound foolish, annoying and unfair but it is perhaps the only criterion by which most people can form their impression about the others. Well groomed people are generally regarded as people with skills, intelligence and professionalism, while a disheveled appearance puts them at a disadvantage in the eyes of the observer. Very few people may stay around to discover the true worth of a person behind the superficial garb of an untidy appearance, sloppy mannerisms and ill fitting clothes. Attire is determined by the culture of a group. Normally, western official attire is accepted throughout the world, but if one is doubtful about informal dressing, Herta A.Murphy, Professor Emeritus of Business Administration and Communication, University of Washington suggests "one should be more formal than informal Terms as 'smart casual' and 'business casual' are symbols for appearance; it is important that you know what they mean in your particular environment" (398). A distinguished look is a composition of the elements - poise, clothes, fashion, accessories, jewellery, personal care, make up, hair style and dressing for the occasion. In addition to visual appeal, all these elements bring about self-awareness, self-confidence and self- esteem, hence, they should be cultivated singly as well as collectively to create a complete, harmonious and pleasing picture.

Body shape and posture play a very important role in communication and it can be positive or negative according to situation. What one says is important, how one says and what one does before and after speaking is equally important. We all



are spontaneous when we talk to our friends and relatives, as soon as we encounter an unfamiliar situation we may become conscious of our posture. Good posture is natural alignment of the body. A physiotherapist would advise to keep ears, shoulders and hipbone in a straight line while sitting and on standing the same should be from hip down to the knee. A gait appears confident if a person walks straight, squared shouldered and stomach inside. There should be no tension at the back of the neck, shoulders, elbows, wrists, pelvis, knees or ankles. Poor posture presents poor image of the body. Not only this, holding the head awkwardly puts a lot of strain on the neck and shoulders, extending the tension throughout the body, while an unnatural posture makes the body a mass of stresses which possibly result in an undue strain on vocal cords. Crossed arms and legs may indicate an unseen barrier or a negative attitude. On the other hand willingness to listen and attentiveness is usually conveyed by uncrossed arms and legs. Similarly, leaning away from the speaker most likely shows opposition, while leaning forward means that a person is open, honest and interested. Lack of interest is also discernable, "Boredom is indicated by the head tilting to one side", by hanging hands or "by the eyes looking straight at the speaker but becoming slightly unfocused" (On line: "Body Language". Wikipedia) Slumped posture presents a person in low spirits while erect posture shows his/her high spirits, energy and confidence. Listening by tilted head shows that the person is receptive. Such aspects of positive and negative posture can be numerous. However, with sincere and determined effort one can get rid of

these traits and develop the right way of walking, sitting and standing.

Gestures refer to the movements made by hands, arms, shoulders, head and torso. Sincere and meaningful gestures not only derive a point home but also add greater value to what is being said. Gestures clarify the ideas and reinforce them; hence, they should be well suited to the audience as well as the occasion. Too many gestures make a person look theatrical, while being still presents him/her rigid, wooden and devoid of expressions. Gestures should be natural and spontaneous and they should not divert the attention of the listeners nor should distract them from the message. For example hand movements should be used to add emphasis to what is being said but waving arms around all over the place; jangling keys and coins in the pocket; wearing clanking jewellery; playing with earrings, wrist watch; fumbling with rings; twisting a key chain; clasping hands tightly; cracking knuckles not only distracts the listener but also indicates hesitation, nervousness or lack of confidence. Sometimes involuntary gestures can give a lot of hidden information about a person's mental state like that of concealing a truth. Dr. Alan Hirsch, St. Luke's Medical center in Chicago, explained "Pinocchio Syndrome" as something when "blood rushes to the nose when people lie. This extra blood may make the nose itchy. The result? People who stretch the truth tend to either scratch their nose or touch it more often" (Online: "Liar, Liar".geocites.com). Gestures increase opportunities to improve bonding and establish a feel good factor. Researches have suggested that among babies ". . . gestures increase and consolidate brain connection, which



contributes to earlier verbalization. . . . Gestures are helpful to boys, who are often later verbal communicators and may need to alleviate physical frustration and stress” (Online: National Literacy Trust).

Face is the index of mind; it conveys warmth and sincerity and is the most expressive part of our body. Expressions that cross our face send out signals which can be encouraging as well as discouraging. “Smiling through one’s eyes is the most important skill or an asset of a good communicator” (Prasad 255). A smile stands for friendliness, a frown for discontent, raised eyebrows for disbelief, tightened jaw muscles for antagonism etc. A harsh or blank facial expression often indicates outright hostility. Sometimes it is quite difficult to smile if one is nervous but it can create an illusion that one is at ease and confident even if one is not. However, a smile can generate smiles creating a relaxed atmosphere. It puts the vocal cords at ease and helps the speaker sound interesting. Facial expressions are subtle as face rarely sends a single message rather it communicates a series of messages – anxiety, recognition, hesitation and pleasure at the same time. Though there appear to be only five basic expressions- inhibited-restricted and solid; uninhibited- spontaneous; substitute-happy with a long face; frozen-no change in expression and blank-no expression at all- we can have multiple combinations. Facial expressions should be encouraging ones. It has been seen that often people assume virtual masks which are rigid and incommunicable. For instance, if the mask is that of tight lips and a tense jaw with little expression, speakers may not get enough encouragement to talk.

Eye is considered to be the window of the soul; hence eye contact is a direct

and powerful form of non-verbal communication. It is only when you see eye-to-eye with the person that real communication takes place. Eyes are a rich source of feedback as a speaker looks at the listeners to find how they are reacting - are they bored, asleep or interested? The listeners too, may search for truthfulness, intelligence, attitude and feelings of the speaker. In a small group one should look at everyone at eye level, not above their heads. During public speaking or a presentation, if the audiences are arranged in a horse shoe shape, one should try to encompass them from the extreme right to the extreme left not just at those sitting at the back. In a large group one can maintain eye contact by drawing a large ‘M’ or ‘W’ round the room. Maintaining an eye contact with one part of the audience may instill a feeling of neglect among them. It is not enough that one should look at the listeners, how one looks at them also matters a lot. Consistent eye contact can indicate that the person is thinking positively of the speaker, while individuals with anxiety disorder –sense of inferiority, lack of confidence, hesitation or insufficient knowledge - are often at discomfort while maintaining it. If a person looks at the speaker but makes the arms-crossed-chest signal, the eye contact could be indicative that something is bothering the person. Fiddling with something while looking at the speaker means that the attention is somewhere else. The attention invariably wanders if a person is not being convinced by what the speaker is saying. Shalini Verma has extensively explored various types of human gazes. Formal gaze is appropriate for the boardrooms, business meetings, job interviews, project presentation, public speaking etc. here; one should look at the



imaginary triangle on the other person's forehead, above the area between the eyes. With this kind of interaction one will be able to control interaction to an extent. Informal gaze is for interacting with friends and associates. One should let his/her gaze casually drop below the other person's eye zone forming an imaginary triangle downward on the area between his/her eyes and chin. This will add a congenial touch to the interface. One may use Lateral gaze to convey either interest or hostility towards the other person or situation. Interest towards something or someone can be shown by smiling and slightly raised eyebrows but while gazing laterally if one uses adverse gestures like down turned eyebrows, a furrowed brow or drooping corners of the mouth one may signal one's suspicious, hostile or critical thoughts (16). So we should be able to analyze the situation, particularly in the professional world, and should make pleasant eye contact with the listeners to show that we are confident, concerned and interested.

Voice, tone, pitch, volume, pace and pause are the paralinguistic aspects of body language. From the quality of voice and the manner of saying things, people deduce a great deal about the personality of the speaker in general and his/her emotions at the time of speaking-whether one is frightened, depressed, excited, aggressive or one is charming, confident or friendly. Information about one's age, sex, health conditions, geographical conditions and social origins may be easily gathered through one's speech even when people cannot see him/her. Buoyant voice, full of expressive changes of pitch and pace suggests a buoyant mood whereas a tired or flat voice suggests a more reflective, subdued and depressed personality. Such

judgments are usually accurate though sometimes the impression created by the way we speak can be unfair, negative or misleading. One should improve his/her speech to boost confidence, to sharpen the impression he/she creates on others and to communicate a message effectively in public and in private life by exploring the natural potentials of one's voice. "Your speech is unique to you as your fingerprints are and to distort it . . . is to distort your true personality" (*How to Write* 462). Every voice has some distinctive qualities that make the way the person speaks unique to him/her. These qualities are tone, pitch, volume and clarity. It is not possible to change the quality of voice as no one can change the shape and size of the organs which produce voice and speech but it can be trained for optimum impact. The voice may be rich and resonant, thin and nasal, pleasant and alluring, hoarse and husky, shrill and squeaky or harsh and irritating. However, everyone can emerge as an eloquent speaker by increasing muscularity and tension of his/her speech organs and training the quality of his/her speech.

The characteristic tone of one's voice is produced by resonating cavities of one's body - the chest, pharynx and so on and the way one uses them. These cavities amplify our voice but if we use them wrongly, they may give our voice a very dull tone so they should be handled in a balanced way. If one develops some cavities using wrong posture while sitting, standing or walking and emphasizes others excessively, one may create resonance imbalance and his/her voice becomes nasal, metallic or plummy.

There is a certain pitch at which one's voice operates most comfortably. By



speaking to this pitch one can avoid straining one's voice. The rise and fall of the voice is essential to convey a variety of emotions. Inflection gives warmth, luster, vitality and exuberance to one's speech. Lowness of pitch indicates sadness, shock, dullness, guilt etc whereas excitement, joy, triumph and anger are expressed by a higher pitch. A well balanced and well suited pitch results in a clear and effective speech.

Volume is loudness or softness of voice. It should be neither too loud nor too soft. If a place is large and open, volume should be high and if the place is small and enclosed the volume should be low. One should be audible and clear. Too much loudness may be regarded as harshness, insensitivity and boorishness while excessive softness may present him/her shy, diffident or physically unfit. Every voice has a natural middle note and every body should try to identify that note because that note will make the person sound natural.

Rate or speed varies from person to person from 80 words to 250 words per minute. The normal rate is 120 words per minute. An extremely slow speaker appears to be dull even though the content may be very interesting. Similarly, a fast speaker causes discomfort to the listeners as the latter need time in between to digest the thought and switch over from one thought to another. By deliberately increasing or reducing the speed we can make our speech interesting, create suspense and explain a difficult idea.

Pausing at natural breaks gives the speaker time to think what he/she has to speak the next and imparts expression to the speech. A pause before or after certain words makes the words prominent; a skillfully placed pause makes the listeners

alert and in presentations it is often used effectively to emphasize a point. Sometimes it is more effective than wild gestures or table thumping. A rapid speaker must use pauses effectively.

Silence can be a very effective means of communication, if used positively and in the right context. The age old adage 'speech is silver; silence is gold' and that of Shakespeare, "The silence often, of pure innocence persuades, when speaking fails" (Winter's Tale, Act ii, Sc.2) undoubtedly refer to the superiority of silence over verbal communication. "Silence is not a negative absence of speech but a positive withdrawal or suspension of speech." (Rai 28) A well timed silence has more eloquence than speech. In face to face communication it can communicate a number of messages. Usually silence is used to convey the feelings of anger and displeasure. It can be very awkward in a group if no one knows how to break it and it can cause discomfort on telephone as the person on one side has no clue of the expressions on the other side. However, with the help of right posture and proper facial expressions, silence can be highly effective.

Touch is an important element of body language. It goes beyond and forges a bond that is more on an emotional and spiritual level than on the physical one. Touch is an inherent desire of almost all the creatures. Children instinctively seek physical contact whenever they are disturbed. As one grows older, one tends to suppress this desire possibly due to fear of social embarrassment. Vinita Nangia in *Times Life*, supports the natural desire of touch, "The Free Hugs Movements is creating waves across the globe," and conveys "hugging releases the hormone Oxytocin, which is proven to arouse a



caring response in men and women.”(TOI, Sunday Supplement) Touch can also convey negative feeling if it is used unwillingly. In India one has to be careful as touch and the extent of it has its own cultural reservations.

Cultural Variations in Body Language

Researchers have shown that non-verbal communication is greatly influenced by the factors of genetics and environment. Cultural value of a region is an integral part of environment and has its own collective unconscious. Verbal and non-verbal communications are greatly influenced by cultural background as in a country like India, there can be regional cultural variations too. For example, the people of Punjab, being warm hearted and friendly, like to stand closer to each other and talk in a comparatively more informal tone than those of the other parts of the country. Here Murphy warns communication enthusiasts against taking cultural differences of body signals lightly, “. . . be cautious; know the variations that could cause the failure in communication . . .” (88) People from the same culture are more likely to interpret words and actions rather accurately. However, cultural differences across the globe increase the chances of misinterpretation of non-verbal signals. A handshake, an embrace, a kiss on cheek and lips in public may be a traditional form of greeting in many western countries but in Asian countries like India, Pakistan and China such gestures are frowned at and are considered actions reserved for one’s private life. Murphy has vividly given examples of cultural variations in body gestures. Some of the illustrations are given here – Filipinos smile, when underneath this behaviour they are angry; the inscrutable

expression of the Japanese does not suggest disinterest but an unwillingness to open up in public; (87) in the U.S.A. ‘thumps up’ is a positive sign while in Greece it is negative. (88) According to Lesikar, in the west most people sit when they wish to remain in place for sometime, but in many Asian countries people squat, which is considered as primitive by some westerners. Bowing as a greeting is traditional in Japan but may be interpreted as a sign of sub-ordination in other cultures. (498) Therefore, one can see that it is not safe to assume that gestures used in all innocence in one country are accepted in the same manner throughout the world.

2. Conclusion

Communication, in all its variety, is playing a dominant role in today’s world of globalization. It has been observed that non-verbal features, along with body language, constitute more than 93% part of any type of communication. The present study, apart from discussing body language and its significance, has thrown light on the various aspects of body kinesics. However, one has to bear in mind that these features are to be studied and used with much flexibility as they cannot be kept in water tight compartments. Moreover, body language is an intuitive feature that requires an extraordinary level of neural integration between the left and right parts of the brain (Tipper, 2015, Body language in the brain). Hence, language study in isolation is not advisable as it may hamper a balanced working of the brain. Words are generally responsible for conflicts in the world as they are sometimes misunderstood and if, such words are replaced or accompanied by



positive non-verbal signals, perhaps, the world would be a better place to live in.

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