

## **Body Language: Actions Speak Louder Than Words\***

**Dr Haytham FARHAT\***

(Accepted 18/9/2000)

### **□ ABSTRACT □**

*Body language (BL) is the process by which nonverbal behaviour is used, either singly or in combination with verbal behaviour, in the exchange and interpretation of messages within a given situation or context. Thus, our body language is a social tool that helps us navigate the social encounters that define our "selves" and fashion our lives. The primary objective of this study is to develop skill in reading action language consciously. In so doing, we might prevent some of the communication breakdowns and misunderstandings we experience in our daily life. We might also learn more about our action language (our BL), and the effect we have on others through our nonverbal communication. We also aim at a better understanding of the personalities of others through their actions and the BL they use. This paper focusses on the significance of Body Language in getting our messages across to other people. A study of this nature includes, among other things, a variety of nonverbal cues such as paralanguage, action language, object language, tactile communication, Spatial communication, temporal communication, and communication through silence.*

---

\*Part of this research was carried out while I was in Australia on a two-year unpaid leave (1996-1998). I am particularly grateful to Granville College and Marrickville Library for providing free access to their invaluable resources and Internet facilities. A word of thanks goes to two anonymous reviewers.

\* Associate Professor at the Department of English, Tishreen University, Faculty of Arts, Lattakia, Syria.

## لغة الجسد: الأفعال أبلغ من الأقوال \*

الدكتور هيثم فرحت \*

(قبل للنشر في 2000/9/18)

### □ الملخص □

إن لغة الجسد عملية يُستخدم فيها السلوك غير اللفظي، إمّا استخداماً فردياً أو استخداماً مواكباً للسلوك اللفظي، في تبادل الرسائل وتفسيرها في سياق أو حالة معينة. لهذا تُعدّ لغة الجسد أداة اجتماعية تساعدنا على تلمس طريقنا عبر العلاقات الاجتماعية التي تحدّد "أنفسنا" وترسم حيواتنا. إن الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة تطوير مهارة قراءة لغة الجسد قراءة شعورية لمنع سوء الفهم أو انهيار عملية التواصل، وفهم واع للغة جسدينا، ولأثر لغة أعمالنا في الآخرين عبر تواصلنا غير اللفظي. كما نرعى إلى فهم أفضل لشخصية الآخرين من خلال أعمالهم ولغة الجسد التي يستخدمونها. تُركّز هذه الورقة على أهمية لغة الجسد في تواصلنا مع الآخرين، وتتضمن دراسة من هذا النوع جملة من المؤشرات غير اللفظية مثل اللغة التي تتحدّث عن اللغة، واللغة التي تتحدّث عن الأفعال، واللغة التي تتحدّث عن الجمادات، والتواصل القائم على اللمس، والتواصل المكاني، والتواصل الزمني، والتواصل عن طريق التزام الصمت.

\* أجريت جزءاً من هذا البحث أثناء إقامتي في أستراليا (1996-1998).

\* مدرّس في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، جامعة تشرين، كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، اللاذقية، سورية.

## **Introduction**

Body language (BL) is the process by which nonverbal behaviour is used, either singly or in combination with verbal behaviour, in the exchange and interpretation of messages within a given situation or context. Thus, our body language is a social tool that helps us navigate the social encounters that define our "selves" and fashion our lives. The primary objective of this study is to develop skill in reading action language consciously. In so doing, we might prevent some of the communication breakdowns and misunderstandings we experience in our daily life. We might also learn more about our action language (our BL), and the effect we have on others through our nonverbal communication. We also aim at a better understanding of the personalities of others through their BL. This paper focusses on the significance of Body Language in getting our messages across to other people. A study of this nature includes, among other things, a variety of nonverbal cues such as paralanguage, action language, object language, tactile communication, Spatial communication, temporal communication, and communication through silence.

## **The Importance of Body Language**

Like verbal communication, body language or nonverbal communication makes use of a language, and of codes and rules. At the same time, however, there are interacting differences between verbal and nonverbal communication. Those differences are discussed in this paper along with three salient principles of nonverbal communication.

Every message is put into a code. The codes to which we direct most of our attention are the spoken or written codes - i.e. verbal communication. Actually, verbal signals carry only a small part of the information that people exchange in everyday interaction. Harrison (1965) has estimated that in face-to-face communication, no more than 35% of the social meaning is carried in the verbal message. However, Mehrabian & Wiener (1966) have found out from their studies that as much as 93% of social meaning is attributable to nonverbal communication. Still, we sometimes make the same old mistake of thinking that all communication must be verbal. However, another code does exist – the nonverbal code, a widely used means of communication.

Nonverbal communication includes the full range of human communication: tone of voice, gesture, posture, movement, and an array of other signals. A good deal of this nonverbal communication goes on around us; it is important because we make decisions based on it and relate to each other through it. From nonverbal communication cues, we make decisions to argue or agree, to laugh or blush, to relax or resist, to continue or end a conversation. Many of the critical meanings in communication are transferred through the nonverbal codes. Although we do not always realize that we are sending and receiving messages nonverbally, the influence of nonverbal communication is always present in face-to-face communication situations. We gesture with our hands, raise our eye-brows, meet someone else's eyes and look away, and shift positions in a chair. Although the actions may seem arbitrary, researchers have discovered in recent years that there is a system to them. Messages come across not only in words but also in body language, and such nonverbal messages often get there faster than do the verbal messages.

Every culture has its own body language, its own nonverbal code. For Westerners, Head Tossing=No; Head Shaking=No; in Bulgaria and India, Nodding and Head Shaking=Yes. The difference that may exist between cultures was at one time dramatically illustrated in Japan's public baths. Japanese girls traditionally express their approval of male guests with shy and subdued laughter. This behaviour

unnerved many male tourists from Europe and America. In order to overcome the cultural differences in meaning, Geisha girls had to be trained to reserve their giggles for Oriental men. One's ethnic background, social class and sex all influence body language. Research has also shown that persons who are truly bilingual are bilingual in body language as well as in words. In other words, one may be able to speak in English, Italian and Arabic. When films of one's spoken words are run without sound, it is not difficult to identify from one's nonverbal communication the language one is speaking.

### **Types of Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication falls into seven categories: para- language, action language, object language, tactile communication, spatial communication, temporal communication and communication through silence.

### **Paralanguage**

It is widely known that there is information in the tone of voice, the emphasis or inflections given to certain words, and the pauses inserted in the sentence. We know from experience that a simple "yes" may express defiance, resignation, acknowledgement, interest, enthusiasm, or agreement, depending on tone and emphasis. Most of us, at one time or another, have remarked, "*it wasn't what he said but how he said it that made me angry!*" We are referring to the nonverbal vocal phenomena – intonation, emphasis, and stress. These vocal phenomena, often referred to as paralanguage, consist of vocal qualifiers, differentiators, and a general category called voice quality.

### **Vocal Qualifiers**

Vocal qualifiers are usually thought of as tones of voice. Increasing loudness or softness is one type of vocal qualifiers. The part of the utterance bearing the increasing loudness or softness may be a single syllable, word, sentence, or a group of sentences. Increasing loudness often expresses anger, hostility or alarm. If you listen to people in the midst of a heated debate, you may notice that the loudness of the speaking voices increases. On the other hand, increasing softness is often used to express disappointment. Loudness or softness is seldom used alone as a qualifier of the verbal message, but each is used along with other techniques ( pitch, tempo, and voice quality) to convey a message.

A second vocal qualifier is pitch. A raised pitch often accompanies loudness and can be used to communicate alarm, annoyance and anxiety. The whining, high-pitched voice may tell a story of tenseness, fear and anxiety that is as revealing as the verbal message itself. However, the low-pitched voice may communicate ease and relaxation. We use pitch, then, to differentiate deductive and interrogative messages. By using certain pitch qualifiers or inflections, we can utter as a question a statement constructed declaratively ("*That was a superb goal?*") Such is the capacity of pitch to qualify the meaning of verbal messages.

Tempo, increased or decreased, is a third vocal qualifier. Increased tempo or rate of speaking sometimes (particularly if associated with other vocal qualifiers) indicates annoyance; at other times, it may indicate anxiety; and it is sometimes associated with energy and intelligence. Conversely, an extremely slow tempo often signals uncertainty.

### **Vocal Differentiation**

Among the most commonly used vocal differentiations are crying, laughing and breaking. These types of communication are used according to the rules governing each culture. In America, for example, women have more freedom to use crying to communicate than men do. Laughing and crying may mean quite different things in different cultures. Custom dictates who can and cannot cry, how much they can cry, and what things can be meant by crying.

Breaking refers to speaking in a broken, halting voice, or to some rigid and intermittently interrupted speech. The nervous giggle is continued to be a form of breaking. The quavering voice of emotion is another example of breaking. In our culture, breaking in any form communicates insecurity and loss of control. Laughing, crying, breaking—any one of these vocal differentiators—could be applied to the same verbal message at different times and under different circumstances to create totally different messages.

### **Voice Characteristics and Qualities**

A third phenomenon is Voice Quality. Meanings are conveyed and understood through voice quality. Anxiety, calm, hostility and other emotional conditions have been identified with voice quality as a general characteristic of a particular emotional state. Although each type of vocal communication has been discussed separately, it would be a mistake to think in terms of each operating separately and individually to communicate nonverbal messages. In practice, these phenomena are combined with one another in many different ways. Hence, people attempting to purposefully receive, interpret, and understand nonverbal messages focus on the general or multiple nonverbal factors rather than on a specific factor.

### **Action Language**

Action language includes all facial expressions, eye behaviour, movements, gestures, and postures that are not used exclusively as substitutes for words. Walking, for example, gives one mobility, but it can also communicate. Similarly, eating can be action language. Eating rapidly may communicate something about the person's hunger, upbringing, or emotional state.

It is useful to divide action language into two categories: (1) expressive actions which are unintentional, and (2) purposive actions which are intentional. The former are often subliminal, while the latter are overt and identifiable by either the listener or the talker. Expressive actions are constantly adaptive, responding to feelings and needs of the moment, while overt actions are specifically communicative and instrumental. Expressive actions result in the message that is "given off" whereas purposive actions result in a given message.

As mentioned earlier, purposive actions are actions one does on purpose—i.e. one knows one is doing that action. However, expressive actions are not overt—i.e. one does not realize one is doing that action, the action is occurring automatically without the sender knowing it. These two categories are not absolute; they do develop at times. Some expressive actions are noticeable, and some communicative gestures become so habitual that we can use them almost unconsciously. The Japanese, for example, bow for their invisible partners over a telephone conversation. It is quite common for a person to develop habituated movements and gestures and to use them irrespective of whether they have any connection with the verbal message or not. Most public figures and entertainers have their idiosyncratic habituated gestures, and these are often used by comedians who imitate well-known public officials.

## **Gestures**

Gestures, being overt and intentional actions, are used to specify, to describe, to emphasize, and even to express abstract concepts; Kimura (1993) and others have pointed out that there is evidence that hand gestures preceded speech in the evolution of communication systems amongst hominoids. This finding supports the modelling of gesture and speech as forms of expression generated by a system where formalized linguistic representation is not the main form from which gestures are derived. As expressive, unintentional actions, gestures, facial expressions, posture, and movement reveal the personality and emotional states. In twitching, blotching, dilated pupils, rising hair, and so on, we can observe the fear, nervousness, anger, joy, and other emotional states of the individual. We may not notice each individual cue, but we observe the total visible pattern; we perceive the visual meaning as a configuration and interpret it almost instantly. By way of illustration, Filipinos will point to an object by shifting their eyes towards it or pursing their lips and point with their mouths, not their hands.

There is little doubt that we differ in our abilities to send and interpret messages—the action language channel—both intentional and unintentional messages. Some people are very expressive in their visible behaviour, while others are more introvert or reserved. Again, some people are keenly sensitive and accurate in understanding nonverbal signs, while others ignore them. Coleman (1949) has found that there is not only a difference in an individual's ability to send and receive nonverbal messages, but there is also a difference between men and women in using nonverbal communication. On the whole, women seem to be better than men in sending nonverbal messages, but men seem to be better than women in interpreting them.

The most readily observed of all action language are facial expressions. We focus on the face more often than on any other part of the body. Specifically, we focus on the eyes. People are careful about how and when they meet one another's eyes. In normal conversation, we allow each eye contact to last only about a second, then one or both of us will look away. Avoiding of eye contact is often interpreted as hiding, dislike, or an attempt to escape. On the other hand, prolonged eye contact often indicates interest and liking. For example, staring is quite common in the Pakistani culture, so people should not be offended if they feel someone is staring at them.

However, McNeil (1992) has concluded that there is no "body language", but that instead gestures complement spoken language. For Kendon (1980), the phrases of gesticulation that co-occur with speech are not to be thought of either as mere embellishments of expression or as by-products of the speech process. They are, rather, an alternative manifestation of the process by which ideas are encoded into patterns of behaviour which can be apprehended by others as reportive of those ideas. Such hand movements voluntarily, but also involuntarily, convey extra information, besides speech, about the internal mental processes of the speaker. Kendon (1988) has ordered gestures of varying nature along a continuum of "linguisticity." Gesticulation – Language-like gestures – Pantomimes - Emblems - Sign Languages. For him, the formalized, linguistic component of the expression present in speech is replaced by signs going from gesticulation to sign languages. This supports the idea that gestures and speech are generated by one integral system.

## **Body Movement**

Movement is another type of action language. Pace, length of stride, and walking posture vary with the emotional state and the personality of the individual.

Our personalities are so much reflected in our manner of walking that it is not difficult to identify people you know well by hearing their footsteps. Some persons have a light, rapid walk, while others shuffle with heavy feet.

Through our actions, we communicate inner feelings and attitudes. Openness, approachability, and acceptance are communicated nonverbally just as closedness, withdrawal, and defensiveness. Nierenberg and Calero (1973) have observed negotiation situations and reported a significantly higher frequency of agreement among men whose coats were open than among those whose coats were buttoned. Open hands, open arms, uncrossed legs, and unbuttoned coats seem to go with acceptance and openness, while folded arms, hidden hands, crossed legs and buttoned coats go with defensiveness and negative attitudes. In the United States, "V" means "victory" or "peace". But in England if the palm faces inward it is a taunt, especially if executed with an upward jerk of the fingers. As the story goes, The French disabled the English archers they captured by cutting off their middle and forefingers. After the battles of Agincourt and Crecy, where the French were heavily defeated, the triumphant English gloated over their French prisoners by holding up their hands, first two fingers upright, palm inward, to show both fingers fully intact. If you have attended a basketball game and the team coach has rushed out to argue with the umpire, you have probably a classic demonstration of closedness. Usually, the umpire crosses his arms, and may even turn his back, in stubborn defensiveness that says, "*I'm closed to negotiation!*" It is generally believed that crossed arms are indicative of defensiveness almost entirely everywhere in the world.

The question that one might ask here is whether action can tell us when someone is lying or playing their cards close to their chests. Some people respond by saying yes. Others suggest the best cue is incongruity among nonverbal messages (X smiles, but clasps hands nervously; crosses legs and points the feet towards the door), or between a verbal message and nonverbal message. Touching or rubbing the nose, rubbing the eye, crossing the leg, covering the mouth with the hands-these, too, are said to suggest strong rejections of the verbal message

There are nonverbal signals for reassurance and reinforcement. When we want our ideas accepted and confirmed, we often send signals that are calls for such reassurance. Our anxiety and lack of confidence is revealed through hand clenching, cuticle picking, pen or pencil chewing or nail biting. A woman may bring her hand to her throat or play with her necklace. All these indicators may imply anxiety over being accepted.

Frustration, which is different from anxiety, over being accepted, may be realized by rubbing the back of the neck, running the fingers through the hair, hand-wringing, and short breathing. Fear or nervousness may be revealed by rapid movements, rapid speech, selecting the furthest chair, crossing the arms or legs, continual shifting of the body, turning the body away from the other communicator, clearing the throat, and cigarette smoking. It has been found out that the lighting and smoking of cigarettes do not indicate fear or tension. In fact, smokers usually light up after the threat has passed—i.e. after the tension has subsided. Rather, it is the putting out of the cigarette or letting it burn without smoking it that indicates nervousness. Hence, action language is rich in the communication of intended and unintended messages. If we could develop skill in reading action language consciously—to verify meanings in a given encounter—we might prevent some of the communication breakdowns and misunderstandings we experience in our daily life. We might also learn more about our own action language, and the effect we have on others through our nonverbal communication.

When people communicate, they do not take words at face value; they rarely trust in words solely, but they observe nonverbal signals which are often employed to determine the authenticity of verbal messages. Hence, we express our liking or disliking for a person or thing, not only through what we say, but rather through how we say it. Culturally speaking, nods of the head may be indicative of social reinforcement, shrugging of shoulders may express indifference, whereas tilting the head from side to side may indicate refusal. Should conflict occur between verbal and nonverbal cues, the nonverbal version tends to be trusted. One can carefully choose one's words, but this is not the case with expressive nonverbal signals; one's body is not easily controlled. Put differently, people can avoid communicating verbally, but they cannot avoid nonverbal communication, since as we shall see, inactivity and silence have a message value. This view is supported by Sigmund Freud (1959) who once claimed that "no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore." Thus, an individual may appear collected and self-composed-unaware of the fact that signs of tension and anxiety are seeping out in the tapping of a foot or the tenseness of fingers.

For communication to work at all, people should not transmit contradictory or conflicting messages. However, some of the social clichés we use force us to send messages that are incompatible with our true feelings expressed through nonverbal cues. We say, "Pleased that you made it," "We had a great time," "Nice to meet you," and so on, irrespective of inner feelings. In a contest concerning validity, it is the nonverbal that is more likely to win.

### **Object Language**

Object language comprises the display of material things, art objects, clothes, the decoration of a room, hairstyle, machines, and the human body. Engagement and wedding rings are objects of communication, as is the Australian flag. It is fairly obvious that the clothing one wears and its style tell something about the individual. People tend to make inferences from the shine of the shoes, the haircut, and a wide range of other material things that reveal one's social sensitivity, associations, preferences, and values – i.e. these issues serve as a guide to personality. How we dress, for example, shows status, group identification, and expression of self-concept.

### **Tactile Communication/Touching Behaviour**

Tactile communication is basically by touch. It is significantly important to human beings, given that it is the first form of communication expressed by an infant. The infant's dire need for tactile contacts – nuzzling, cuddling, patting, feeling and – the quick response to and acceptance of tactile messages – are widely known facts. Parental care and love through infancy and childhood are manifestations of tactile communication; early tactile experiences the child is exposed to will have a bearing on early personality development. Through early tactile experiences, then, the infant begins to communicate and generally develops communication into capacities of other sensory perceptions.

For adults, tactile communication is a powerful form of nonverbal communication. Placing one's own arm over the back of a chair in which someone is sitting, or affectionately patting someone's shoulders or back is seen offensive in Thailand. Along these lines, we can distinguish at least four properties associated with tactile communication: (a) tactile experience is normally limited to two people; (b) tactile experience is immediate and transitory in the sense that it is operative only as

long as contact is maintained; (c) tactile communication is reciprocal-i.e. who or what we touch also responds accordingly; and (d) tactile experience occurs through signals (direct stimulation through the sense of touch) rather than through symbolic mediation. Tactile experiences, being emotional and attitudinal messages and responses, are powerful and capable of a dazzling variety of transformations in human communication.

### **Spatial Communication**

Hall (1973) has observed that cultures establish meanings that pertain to distance or space. In the West, the comfortable and appropriate distance to keep for conversation is about an arm's length. The Oriental and Latin American, as they talk to Westerners, move in closer; Westerners are likely to interpret that space violation as intrusive, too close for comfort, or aggressive; and, if the Westerners back away, the other party are apt to think of Westerners as being snobbish or unfriendly. Hall has also identified the following distances that may be indicative of certain types of messages. They include (1) very close (3 to 6 inches); (2) close (8 to 12 inches); (3) near (12 to 20 inches).

Birds, animals, and people define the boundaries on which they stand as their own personal space. They may allow others to approach, but not too closely. Personal space seems to be one of those things we react to, but do not acknowledge in words. The amount of space a person requires is triggered by personality-i.e. depending on how introvert or extrovert that person might be. Each of us has a personal space that we carry around with us; this is often referred to as personal territory. Personal space is very limited in China, especially while conversing. You may have the idea to them move backwards, while probably will make your Chinese host follow you forwards, thus resulting in a bit of a dance!

Space does speak volumes. We must ensure that we are aware of what we communicate with our own use of space and distance, and of what others are trying to tell us through their use of space

### **Temporal Communication**

As is the case with space, time can be thought of as a form of nonverbal communication-i.e. time talks. In Western culture, punctuality communicates respect and delay or procrastination can be an insult. However, in other cultures, ill-timing is an insult. In the West, an overdue message, be it term assignment, business report or press conference, is likely to have undesirable repercussions. Delay or lateness often communicates a low regard for the receiver and for the intended message as well. This is why many people use only air mail for their letters; they believe that in so doing they give more credence and respect to communication.

### **Silence as Communication**

Silence can also be used to communicate. What is not said usually has the same effect as what is said. One need not be extremely sensitive to silence to realize its power as a tool of communication. Surely, silence can sometimes be rebuffing, because through silence, deliberate avoidance of eye contact, and total lack of response, one can readily get the impression that the individual sending these messages wishes to have time to himself or herself. Such attitude by the "silence-user" is insulting and provocative; it communicates because we 'get the message' quite easily. Silence is respected in China, so do not be discouraged if there

are long periods of no talking. This time can be used for contemplating by your hosts. However, in Walpiri, people do not speak for months when mourning; they use gestures instead; it is their own version of wearing black.

### **Summary**

In this paper, we have looked at nonverbal communication, being of paramount significance for us in exchanging messages with other people. We have considered seven kinds of nonverbal cues. These include paralanguage, action language, object language, tactile, spatial, and temporal communication, and communication through silence. Any of the cues, alone or in combination, may be employed to modify verbal messages, or to contradict or refute them. Nonverbal communication may also be utilized on its own to create harmony and understanding which are necessary aspects for one's survival. What we should keep in mind is that these cues will help us become more accurate in knowing what the individual is trying to tell us. As stated at the outset, actions do in fact speak louder than words. We place heavy emphasis on the nonverbal indicators to get our true impression of others.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Coleman, J. C. (1949) "Facial Expressions Of Emotion," *Psychological Monographs*, **36**, 1-36.
- Freud, S. (1959) "Fragment of an analysis of a Case of Hysteria." *Collected Papers*, **3**, 13-146.
- Goodacre, P. and Follers, J. (1987) *Communication Across Cultures: People, Culture, And Change In Australia*, Australia: Social Science Press.
- Hall, E. (1973) *The Silent Language*, New York: Doubleday & Co.
- Harrison, R. (1965) "Nonverbal Communication: Exploration Into Time, Space, Action, And Object" in J. H. Campbell and H. W. Helper (eds.) *Dimensions In Communications*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co.
- Kendon, A. (ed.) (1981) *Nonverbal Communication, Interaction and Gesture*, New York: Monton Publishers.
- Kendon, A. (1988) "How Gestures Can Become Like Words" in Potyatos, F. (ed.) *Corss-cultural Perspectives In Nonverbal Communication*, Toronto:Hogrefe, 131-141.
- Kimura, D. (1993) *Neuromotor Mechanisms In Human Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Knapp, M. (1980) *Essentials of Nonverbal Communication*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Kress, G. (ed.) (1989) *Communication And Culture: An Introduction*, New South Wales: New South Wales University Press.
- Leathers, D. G. (1986) *Successful Nonverbal Communication: Principles And Applications*, New York: Macmillan.
- Matthews, R. (1990) *Body Language*, London: Wayland (Publishers) Ltd.
- McNeil, D. (1992) *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal About Thought*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Mehrabian, A. and Weiner, M. (1966) "Non Immediacy Between Communication And Object Of Communication In A Verbal Message," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, **30**.
- Mohan, T. et al. (1992) *Communicating! Theory And Practice*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Australia: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- Montagu, A. (1978) *Touching*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Nierenberg, G. R. and Calero, H. (1973) *How To Read A Person Like A Book*, New York: Pocket Books, Inc.
- Wainwright, G. R. (1985) *Body Language*, London: Hedder & Stoughton Ltd.