6.5: Types of Nonverbal Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the similarities and differences among eight general types of nonverbal communication

Now that we have discussed the general principles that apply to nonverbal communication, let’s examine eight types of nonverbal communication to further understand this challenging aspect of communication:

1. Space
2. Time
3. Physical characteristics
4. Body movements
5. Touch
6. Paralanguage
7. Artifacts
8. Environment

Space

When we discuss space in a nonverbal context, we mean the space between objects and people. Space is often associated with social rank and is an important part of group communication. Who gets the corner office? Why is the head of the table important and who gets to sit there?

People from diverse cultures may have different normative space expectations. If you are from a large urban area,
having people stand close to you may be normal. If you are from a rural area, or a culture where people expect more
space, someone may be standing “too close” for comfort and not know it.

medicine and anthropology* (pp. 422–445). New York, NY: International Universities Press. serving in the European and
South Pacific Regions in the Corps of Engineers during World War II, traveled around the globe. As he moved from one
place to another, he noticed that people in different countries kept different distances from each other. In France, they
stood closer to each other than they did in England. Hall wondered why that was and began to study what he called
proxemics, or the study of the human use of space and distance in communication.

In *The Hidden Dimension*, he indicated there are two main aspects of space: territory and personal space. Hall drew on
anthropology to address the concepts of dominance and submission, and noted that the more powerful person often
claims more space. This plays an important role in modern society, from who gets the corner office to how we negotiate
space between vehicles. Road rage is increasingly common where overcrowding occurs, and as more vehicles occupy
the same roads, tensions over space are predictable.

Territory is related to control. As a way of establishing control over your own room, maybe you painted it your favorite
color, or put up posters that represent your interests or things you consider unique about yourself. Families or
households often mark their space by putting up fences or walls around their houses. This sense of a right to control
your space is implicit in territory. Territory means the space you claim as your own, are responsible for, or are willing to
defend.

The second aspect Hall highlight is personal space, or the “bubble” of space surrounding each individual. As you walk
down a flight of stairs, which side do you choose? We may choose the right side because we’ve learned that is what is
expected, and people coming up the same stair choose their right, or your left. The right choice insures that personal
space is not compromised. But what happens when some comes up the wrong side? They violate the understood rules
of movement and often self-correct. But what happens if they don’t change lanes as people move up and down the
stairs? They may get dirty looks or even get bumped as people in the crowd handle the invasion of “their” space. There
are no lane markers, and bubbles of space around each person move with them, allowing for the possibility of collision.

We recognize the basic need for personal space, but the normative expectations for space vary greatly by culture. You
may perceive that in your home people sleep one to each bed, but in many cultures people sleep two or more to a bed
and it is considered normal. If you were to share that bed you might feel uncomfortable, while someone raised with
group sleeping norms might feel uncomfortable sleeping alone. From where you stand in an aerobics class in relation to
others, to where you place your book bag in class, your personal expectations of space are often at variance with
others.

As the context of a staircase has norms for nonverbal behavior, so group interactions. In North America, eye contact is
expected. Big movements and gestures are not generally expected and can be distracting. The speaking group member
occupies a space on the “stage,” when they have the “floor” (or it is their turn to speak), even if there are co-workers on
either side. When you occupy that space, the group will expect to behave in certain ways. If you talk to the laptop screen
in front of you, the group may perceive that you are not really paying attention to them. They also might think you need
to read your own report, a less than confident position. Group members are expected to pay attention to, and interact
with, each other, even if in the feedback is primarily nonverbal. Your movements should coordinate to tone, rhythm, and
content of your message. Tapping your pen, keeping your hands in your pockets or your arms crossed may communicate nervousness, or even defensiveness, and detract from your message.

As a general rule, try to act naturally, as if you were telling a friend a story, and your body will relax and your nonverbal gestures will come more naturally. Practice is key to your level of comfort, and the more practice you get, the more comfortable and less intimidating it will seem to you.

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**Time**

Do you know what time it is? How aware you are of time varies by culture and normative expectations of adherence (or ignorance) of time. Some people, and the communities and cultures they represent, are very time-oriented. The Eurorail Trains in Germany are famous for departing and arriving according to the schedule. In contrast, if you take the train in Argentina and you’ll find that the schedule is more of an approximation of when the train will leave or arrive.

“Time is money” is a common saying across many cultures, and reveals a high value for time. In social contexts, it often reveals social status and power. Who are you willing to wait for? A doctor for an office visit when you are sick? A potential employer for a job interview? Your significant other, or children? Sometimes we get impatient, and our impatience underscores our value for time.

When you give a presentation to your team or group, does your group have to wait for you? Time is a relevant factor in the communication process in your speech. The best way to show your group respect is to honor the time expectation associated with your speech. Always try to stop speaking before the group stops listening; if the members perceive that you have “gone over time,” they will be less willing to listen. This in turn will have a negative impact on your ability to communicate your message.

Suppose you are presenting a speech to your team that has three main points. Your group will look to you to regulate the time and attention to each point, but if you spend all your time on the first two points and rush through the third, your presentation won’t be balanced and will lose rhythm. The speaker occupies a position of some power, but it is the group that gives them that position. Your team is counting on you to make a difference, and to not waste their time. By displaying respect and maintaining balance, you will move through your points more effectively.

When you order a meal at a “fast food” restaurant, what are your expectations for how long you will have to wait? When you order a pizza online for delivery, when do you expect it will arrive? If you order cable service for your home, when do you expect it might be delivered? In the first case you might measure the delivery of a hamburger in a matter of seconds or minutes, and perhaps 30 minutes for pizza delivery, but you may measure the time from your order to working cable in days or even weeks. You may even have to be at your home from 8 A.M. to noon waiting for its installation. The expectations vary by context, and we often grow frustrated in a time-sensitive culture when the delivery does not match our expectations.

In the same way, how long should it take to respond to a customer’s request for assistance or information? If they call on the phone, how long should they wait on hold? How soon should they expect a response to an e-mail? As a skilled group communicator, you will know to anticipate normative expectations and do your best to meet those expectations more quickly than anticipated. Your prompt reply or offer of help in response to a request, even if you cannot solve the issue on the spot, is often regarded positively, contributing to the formation of positive communication interactions.

Across cultures the value of time may vary. Some Mexican-American friends may invite you to a barbecue at 8 P.M., but when you arrive you are the first guest, because it is understood that the gathering actually doesn’t start until after 9 P.M. In France, similarly, an 8 P.M. party invitation would be understood to indicate you should arrive around 8:30, but in Sweden 8 P.M. means 8 P.M., and latecomers may not be welcome. Some Native Americans, particularly elders, speak in well-measured phrases and take long pauses between phrases. They do not hurry their speech or compete for their turn, knowing no one will interrupt them. McLane, S. (1998). Turn-taking and the extended pause: a study of interpersonal communication styles across generations on the Warm Springs Indian reservation. In K. S. Sitaram, & M. Prosser (Eds.), *Civic discourse: Multiculturalism, cultural diversity, and global communication* (pp. 213–227). Stamford, CT: Ablex Publishing Company. Some Orthodox Jews observe religious days when they do not work, cook, drive, or use electricity. People around the world have different ways of expressing value for time.

**Physical Characteristics**

You didn’t choose your birth, your eye color, the natural color of your hair, or your height, but people spend millions every year trying to change their physical characteristics. You can get colored contacts, dye your hair, and, if you are shorter than you’d like to be, buy shoes to raise your stature a couple of inches. You won’t be able to change your birth, and no matter how much you stoop to appear shorter, you won’t change your height until time and age gradually makes itself apparent. If you are tall, you might find the correct shoe size, pant length, or even the length of mattress a challenge, but there are rewards. Have you ever heard that taller people get paid more? Burnham, T., & Phelan, J. (2000). *Mean genes: from sex to money to food: taming our primal instincts*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing. There
is some truth to that idea. There is also some truth to the notion that people prefer symmetrical faces (where both sides are equal) over asymmetrical faces (with unequal sides; like a crooked nose or having one eye or ear slightly higher than the other). Burnham, T., & Phelan, J. (2000). *Mean genes: from sex to money to food: taming our primal instincts*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

We often make judgments about a person’s personality or behavior based on physical characteristics, and researchers are quick to note those judgments are often inaccurate. Wells, W., & Siegel, B. (1961). Stereotypes somatypes. *Psychological Reports, 8*, 77–78. Cash, T., & Kilcullen, R. (1985). The eye of the beholder: susceptibility to sexism and beautyism in the evaluation of managerial applicants. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 15*, 591–605. Regardless of your eye or hair color, or even how tall you are, being comfortable with yourself is an important part of your presentation. Act naturally and consider aspects of your presentation you can control in order to maximize a positive image for the group or team.

### Body Movements

The study of body movements, called kinesics, is key to understanding nonverbal communication. Since your actions will significantly contribute to the effectiveness of your group interactions, let’s examine four distinct ways body movements that complement, repeat, regulate, or replace your verbal messages.

Body movements can complement the verbal message by reinforcing the main idea. For example, you may be providing an orientation presentation to a customer about a software program. As you say, “Click on this tab,” you may also initiate that action. Your verbal and nonverbal messages reinforce, or complement, each other. You can also reinforce the message by repeating it. If you first say “Click on the tab,” and then motion with your hand to the right, indicating that the customer should move the cursor arrow with the mouse to the tab, your repetition can help the listener understand the message.

In addition to repeating your message, body movements can also regulate conversations. Nodding your head to indicate that you are listening may encourage the customer to continue asking questions. Holding your hand up, palm out, may signal them to stop and provide a pause where you can start to answer.

Body movements also substitute or replace verbal messages. Ekman and Friesen, Ekman, P., & Friesen, W. (1967). Head and body cues in the judgment of emotions: a reformulation. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 24*, 711–724. found facial features communicate to others our feelings, but our body movements often reveal how intensely we experience those feelings. For example, if the customer makes a face of frustration while trying to use the software program, they may need assistance. If they push away from the computer and separate themselves physically from interacting with it, they may be extremely frustrated. Learning to gauge feelings and their intensity as expressed by customers takes time and patience, and your attention to them will improve your ability to facilitate positive interactions.

### Touch

Touch in communication interaction is called haptics, and Seiler and Beall, Seiler, W., & Beall, M. (2000). *Communication: making connections* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. identify five distinct types of touch, from impersonal to intimate, as listed in Table 6.3.
Table 6.3 Types of Touch

1. Functional-professional touch
   Medical examination, physical therapy, sports coach, music teacher

2. Social-polite touch
   Handshake

3. Friendship-warmth touch
   Hug

4. Love-intimacy touch
   Kiss between family members, romantic partners

5. Sexual-arousal touch
   Sexual caressing and intercourse

Before giving your presentation, you may interact with people by shaking hands and making casual conversation. This interaction can help establish trust before you take the stage. While speaking in groups we do not often touch people on the team, but we do interact with visual aids, our note cards, and other objects. How we handle them can communicate our comfort level. It’s always a good idea to practice using the technology, visual aids or note cards we’ll use in a speech in a practice setting. Using the technology correctly by clicking the right button on the mouse or pressing the right switch on the overhead project can contribute to, or detract from, your credibility.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage is the exception to the definition of nonverbal communication. You may recall that we defined nonverbal communication as not involving words, but paralanguage exists when we are speaking, using words. Paralanguage involves verbal and nonverbal aspects of speech that influence meaning, including tone, intensity, pausing, and even silence.

Perhaps you’ve also heard of a pregnant pause, a silence between verbal messages that is full of meaning. The meaning itself may be hard to understand or decipher, but it is there nonetheless. For example, your co-worker Jan comes back from a sales meeting speechless with a ghost-white complexion. You may ask if the meeting went all right. “Well, ahh…” may be the only response you get. The pause speaks volumes. Something happened, though you may not know what. It could be personal if Jan’s report was not well received, or it could more systemic, like the news that sales figures are off by 40% and pink slips may not be far behind.

Silence or vocal pauses can communicate hesitation, indicate the need to gather thought, or serve as a sign of respect. Keith Basso, Basso, K. A. (1970). To give up on words: silence in western Apache culture. In Cultural communication and intercultural contact (pp. 301–318). Hillsdale, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum. quotes an anonymous source as stating, “it is not the case that a man who is silent says nothing.” Sometimes we learn just as much, or even more, from what a person does not say as what they do say. In addition, both Basso and Susan Philips, Philips, S. (1983). The invisible culture: communication in the classroom and community on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Chicago, IL: Waveland Press. found that traditional speech among Native Americans places a special emphasis on silence.

Artifacts

Do you cover your tattoos when you are at work? Do you know someone who does? Or perhaps you know someone who has a tattoo and does not need to cover it up on their job? Expectations vary a great deal, but body art or tattoos...

- 20% of workers indicated their body art had been held against them on the job.
- 42% of employers said the presence of visible body art lowered their opinion of workers.
- 44% of managers surveyed have body art.
- 52% of workers surveyed have body art.
- 67% of workers who have body art or piercings cover or remove them during work hours.

In your line of work, a tattoo might be an important visual aid or might detract from your effectiveness. Piercings may express individuality, but you need to consider how they will be interpreted by employers and customers.

Artifacts are forms of decorative ornamentation that are chosen to represent self-concept. They can include rings and tattoos, but may also include brand names and logos. From clothes to cars, watches, briefcases, purses, and even eyeglasses, what we choose to surround ourselves with communicates something about our sense of self. They may project gender, role or position, class or status, personality and group membership or affiliation. Paying attention to a customer’s artifacts can give you a sense of the self they want to communicate, and may allow you to more accurately adapt your message to meet their needs.

Environment

Environment involves the physical and psychological aspects of the communication context. More than the tables and chairs in an office, environment is an important part of the dynamic communication process. The perception of one’s environment influences one’s reaction to it. For example, Google is famous for its work environment, with spaces created for physical activity and even in-house food service around the clock. The expense is no doubt considerable, but Google’s actions speak volumes. The results produced in the environment, designed to facilitate creativity, interaction, and collaboration, are worth the effort.

Key Takeaway

- Nonverbal communication can be categorized into eight types: space, time, physical characteristics, body movements, touch, paralanguage, artifacts, and environment.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

1. Do a www.google.com search on space and culture. Share your findings with your classmates.
2. Note where people sit on the first day of class, and each class session thereafter. Do students return to the same seat? If they do not attend class, do the classmates leave their seat vacant? Compare your results.
3. What kind of value do you have for time? And what is truly important to you? Make a list of what you spend your time on, and what you value most. Do the lists match? Are you spending time on what is truly important to you? Relationships take time, and if you want them to succeed in a personal or business context you have to make them a priority.
4. To what degree is time a relevant factor in communication in the information age? Give some examples. Discuss your ideas with a classmate.
5. How many people do you know who have chosen tattoos or piercings as a representation of self and statement of individuality? Survey your friends and share your findings with your classmates.