2.4: Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Communication is the transfer of information from one person to another. Studies indicate that daily human communication breaks down roughly this way: 9% writing, 16% reading, 30% speaking, and 45% listening. Humans communicate on two levels, the verbal level and the nonverbal level. Our everyday communication is a constant mix of verbal and nonverbal message sending and receiving.

Albert Mehrabian describes 3 Levels of Interpersonal Communication. Whenever we communicate with another person we are communicating our message on 3 different levels. Below are the 3 levels and what percentage each of them contributes to making the message clear.

- 7% Words: interpreting the exact words that are being spoken
- 38% Paralanguage: how we say those words with our tone, intonation and verbal pace.
- 55% Non-Verbal signals: including everything from facial expression to body posture.¹

**Verbal communication** is defined as any means of communicating that uses language (words, numbers or symbols). Verbal communication requires an organized language system. Such a system is composed of a group of labels used to describe people, events and things in our environment. These labels are conveyed from one person to another by a variety of means including vocalization and writing.

**Nonverbal communication** is defined by Communicologists Tortoriello, Blott, and DeWine:

> “The exchange of messages through non-linguistic means, including: kinesics (body language), facial expressions and eye contact, clothing and physical appearance, tactile communication, space and territory, culture and social system, paralanguage (tone, pitch, rate, inflection), and the use of silence and time.” ²

Your nonverbal communication will affect, positively or negatively, the impressions and attitudes people form about you.
At the same time, your ability to interpret different types of body language will enhance your ability to participate in and understand conversation.

Human communication has a better chance of success when nonverbal messages and verbal messages work in harmony together. Dysfunction and confusion result when the spoken word is contradicted by body messages. A communication “double-bind” is created when our verbal and nonverbal communication contradict each other. It’s the old saying, “Your lips say no, but your eyes say yes.” This can often lead to communication misunderstanding or failure. Communication success improves when there is a consistency between the verbal and nonverbal signals.

An example of inconsistency is sarcasm. Sarcasm occurs when the words used and the tone of those words contradicts each other. “You look good” can mean two different things depending on how those words are spoken. Another example is the phrase, "Shut up." This can mean either "Be quiet" or "Are you kidding?" depending on the tone used. My wife has about 20 different ways of saying my first name. Each way has a very different meaning.

Studies suggest we are not as effective communicators as we might think we are. The Rand Corporation says that poor communication in the workplace costs this nation about 1% in lost GDP (gross domestic product) economic growth every year. And 1% of $18 trillion is enormous. Michigan State University says that first attempt at communication success, defined as the receiver getting the message in the way the sender intended, is only one in five, or 20%.

Communication is interactive, so an important influence on its effectiveness is our relationship with others. Do they hear and understand what we are trying to say? Are they listening well? Are we listening well in response? Do their responses show that they understand the words and the meanings behind the words we have chosen? Is the mood positive and receptive? Is there trust between them and us? Are there differences that relate to ineffective communication, divergent goals or interests, or fundamentally different ways of seeing the world? The answers to these questions will give us some clues about the effectiveness of our communication and the ease with which we may be able to move through conflict.

One key aspect of communication that occurs in the message and relates to the critical thinking is the **structure** and **vocabulary** of a language.

Reference