

# LINGUISTICS PROJECT 2:

## BODY LANGUAGE

All animals--and, some argue, plants--communicate. Human animals use symbols (especially speech), but they still use the non-symbolic ways of communicating that the species inherited. We have recognized body language explicitly for centuries; when Julius Caesar said, "Yon Cassius hath a lean and hungry look," Shakespeare's audience was presumably as accustomed as we are to a remark about body-as-statement. Today the formal study of nonverbal communication is a staple of all of the behavioral sciences, including biology.

### PURPOSE

Body language is an extensive and complex topic, but the purpose of the present assignment is modest: to provide a brief introduction and to heighten your awareness of the extent to which people communicate with their bodies. This awareness will make you a better student of ritual and of the ethnographic scene in our upcoming projects and assignments.

### PROCEDURE

Either (1) record a communication exchange between two or more people that does not involve words, or (2) record the nonverbal portion of a communication exchange which does involve words. As before, in a separate section of your paper, clearly marked off from the first, analyze the communication including its social, cultural, and emotional context. You may want to entertain the question, "To what extent was this nonverbal communication culturally mediated? To what extent is it identical or very similar to communication among nonhuman animals?" And also, "To what extent did the participants invent the communication, to what extent is it culturally stereotypical?" This paper will probably range from three to five pages.

### PITFALLS TO AVOID

1. Sign languages are non-oral but not nonverbal. They are gesture substitutes for words, hence verbal communications that don't happen to use the aural-oral channel. We're seeking genuinely nonverbal communications, including zeros (i.e., the significance of not communicating when a communication would normally be expected). You may want to look at physical distance between people who are communicating: for example, some cultures (Arabs, Latinos) tend stand closer, while others (Puritans, Northern Europeans) tend to stand farther apart.

2. Contact sports don't usually work well for this assignment, although they fit the definition. Most communication in a fast-moving game is nonverbal, but one cannot see subtleties from the audience. The spectators, in contrast, provide material for observation as their interest waxes and wanes, focuses on the playing field or on their neighbors, and so on.

3. Avoid overconfidence in your analysis. Gesture is less specific than words and easily misinterpreted. One student decided that the body language a client of her employer used meant dissatisfaction with the service a clerk was giving him, only to discover later that he was describing a baseball player he didn't like. A paper describing misunderstandings of body language would be an interesting way to do this assignment.

### **FURTHER IN THE SAME DIRECTION**

Not many professional anthropologists specialize in nonverbal communication, although all of us are sufficiently aware of it to note it as we do our ethnographic work, and its formal study is a staple of several behavioral sciences. Two who have devoted themselves to the topic are Edward T. Hall and Ray L. Birdwhistell. The former coined the term *proxemics*, or the study of cultural systems of using space, including interpersonal distance, and the latter invented *kinesics*, which is the study of cultural systems of body movement (see Hall, 1959, 1966, 1974, 1976, 1983, and Birdwhistell, 1952, 1970). Hall has had more influence than Birdwhistell, in part because he usually avoids technical discussion and writes for lay audiences. Both cite works by ethologists in biology and psychology, thus establishing connections between human and nonhuman communication without words. More recently, feminist scholars have focused on the gender of body language; two such reports by psychologists are Clara Mayo and Nancy Henley (eds.), *Gender and Nonverbal Behavior* (1981), and Judith Hall, *Nonverbal Sex Differences* (1984).

## *SAMPLES*

# A Drug Buy

*For this example, the author used a scene from a TV show (a cop drama set in Chicago). While this type of "research" is not acceptable for this assignment, it does show keen observation and analysis (but, was he watching the whole picture or what the show's director wanted him to see?) At least three aspects of this paper are noteworthy: first, the author's keen observation of an exchange which is not only nonverbal but also somewhat hidden; second, his explicit consideration of cultural -mediation and stereotype; third, his speculative discussion of the cultural significance of what he has just described. In an exchange lasting only a minute or two, he sees a good part of the power tension between young whites and blacks.*

The nonverbal exchange described here occurred in the morning on a spring day. The event was witnessed from Gee's, a hamburger joint across the street from school. It is in a lower--middle-class, predominantly black neighborhood on the, border between Chicago and Skokie. The participants are a white teenage male with long bushy black hair, wearing blue jeans and a Slayer T-shirt, and a black teenage male wearing a full-length Charlotte Hornets' winter jacket, blue jeans, and a pair of Air Jordans.

## **INCIDENT**

White male - walks slowly up the sidewalk, gradually slowing down as he gets closer to the black male. He makes eye contact several times.

Black male - glances at the white male, does a quick check of the surrounding area. He then looks back at the white male and reaches up, touching his own left nostril.

White male - nods, glances around quickly, stops walking, and stands next to the black male. He then reaches into his pocket, pulls out a closed fist, and stretches his arm out to the black male.

Black male - glances around again, sticks his palm out, receives what's in the white male's fist, and closes his fist around it. He then turns his palm toward himself, opens it briefly, then puts it in his pocket. He then reaches in another pocket, glances around again, and extends his closed fist to the white male.

White male - extends palm and closes fist on object offered by the black male. He then glances around, looks at the object, appears to fiddle with it, and then sticks his pinky finger in his mouth. Then he smiles and gives the peace sign with his hand to the black male and continues down the block.

Black male - nods and grins at the white male, walks in the other direction for about 30 yards, and then stops to lean against a lamppost.

## ANALYSIS

The segment of nonverbal communication just described contains a variety of gestures. Some of these gestures have a very specific meaning (such as the touching of the nostril to ask "you want cocaine?"); others are just the effects of the situation on the individuals (such as the constant, glances around for police), which tend to communicate the nature of the situation to the observer.

In a way, the black male begins the interaction and the nonverbal communication simply by wearing a full-length Charlotte Hornets' winter jacket in the middle of spring, and standing around idly. In the neighborhood my high school was in (partly just because the school is there), this communicated the fact that one had something illegal to sell. The white male receives this communication and communicates his interest in making a purchase by slowing down his walking speed as he nears the black male. The black male then attempts to get the white male to stop and buy drugs from him by touching his nostril. The white male then confirms he wished to purchase cocaine by nodding.

The next few steps of the exchange contain nonverbal communication, but not between the two participants. The fact that they exchange fistfuls of objects (one presumably cocaine and the other cash), being careful not to let them be seen, and the fact that they look around constantly, communicates to anyone watching them that they are engaging in illegal activity. For the drug dealer, however, this communication to those around him is a benefit, as long as there are no police officers nearby. That way he can communicate to others that he is the man to buy drugs from.

The final communication from the white male is when he tastes the cocaine with his pinky finger and nods. This shows that he is happy with the purchase he made. (The method of discovery of the potency of cocaine is taste. If it numbs your tongue, it is supposedly very good.) The final communication from the black male is the grin and the nod, which shows he is also happy with the exchange, and seems to say, "I'll be around if you need more."

Although some parts of our society are becoming more liberal toward some drugs that are currently illegal, you will not find many who will stipulate that cocaine doesn't kill. This situation is of special concern for many in the United States. As a result of the highly illegal nature of the interaction, the white male's and the black male's communication was done in different emotional contexts. The white male's communication was motivated by the fear of getting arrested. The black male's communication was motivated by the fear of getting arrested, plus the emotional need to appear unafraid of getting arrested to those around him.

The nonverbal communication in this situation is definitely culturally mediated. One aspect of the cultural mediation is the fact that cocaine is illegal and frowned upon. The communication is sneaky and speeds up the process by not having to speak. Another way in which the communication is culturally mediated is the fact that our culture has in many ways forced young black teenagers into the position where they have to sell drugs in order to keep up the lifestyle they think they must have. Somehow material goods, such as the \$400 Hornets' jacket and the \$150 Air Jordan basketball shoes, have become a necessity for them, so much so that they will kill each other for a pair of shoes, or sell drugs to someone else, and kill them. Although society can't be completely responsible, it does deserve some of the blame.

The individuals involved in this communication didn't invent it by any means. It seems rather to be the "official" nonverbal communication of the drug dealer. All over the city you can see glimpses of drug deals going down in which symbols similar to those I saw that day are used. As for the question of stereotypical communication, I don't think I could have picked an incident more so.

# Eyes to Heaven

*This eye blink of communication is used both by the older and the younger generations of one family. The author occupies the middle generation and sees "the look" both up and down the family tree. This paper demonstrates the difference in body language between generations - that what preoccupies teenagers is different from what grandparents see and take note of. This example is a little short, and does not follow the guideline, but gives you an idea of an angel to take in your observations and analysis.*

There is a "look," which includes raised eyebrows and eyes rolled to the sky, that seems to be used to communicate various messages, such as disbelief, disrespect, and boredom. Sometimes it denotes ridicule.

This "look" is often in evidence when persons of different generations are gathered together. For example: Grandmother is enthroned at the festive holiday table. Seated also around the table are her children and grandchildren. Someone always says, "I can't eat another bite ... I'm stuffed!" The grandmother (who tips the scales at close to 300 lbs.) agrees, but then as the children are clearing away the remains of the feast to facilitate presentation of dessert, the grandmother says, "I believe I'll have a bit more of that dressing. . . just a dab." Out of her line of vision, two or more of the older children exchange the "look": Eyebrows are raised and eyes roll heavenward in silent amusement at the old lady's gluttony.

A teenaged daughter, upon being told by her parents that she may not attend a party where her parents know that the parents of the party giver will not be home will wail, "You never let me do anything ... you hate me!" The parents will exchange the "look," and it's an expression of shared ... endurance.

Since the "look" is not meant to be seen by its subject, it is an expression of solidarity against some aspect of the subject. It's a polite way of agreeing to disagree, without verbalizing.

To tell Grandma she's already had three servings of dressing and will doubtless have at least two servings of pie--"Both kinds look sooooo good ... give me just a smidgen of each"--would be futile. Grandma is in her very late 70s. She won't change her eating habits for her health's sake, and certainly not for the sake of her children's approval. So behind her back, the "look" is exchanged as a substitute for confronting Grandma.

The "look" is a substitute for verbal and direct confrontation. It acknowledges a shared opinion or feeling concerning another person, often when it would be unkind or futile to express it directly.

It also expresses a lack of power. When used in the presence of a superior or an authority figure, it defuses the frustration, and perhaps anger, of those who are powerless to effect change of the "official" attitude.

When I am with my friends, I sometimes feel the silent "look" exchanged at some terribly wise pronouncement of mine, and I realize that my statement was doubtless inappropriate, or repetitive . . . and I sigh and give the "look" to my ... self.