



The Effects of Non-verbal Symbols on Interpersonal and Intercultural Communication

Cletus Ganaa

Liberal Studies Department, Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Box 767, Upper East Region

Charles Daarta Nanglakong

Liberal Studies Department, Bolgatanga Polytechnic, Box 767, Upper East Region

Eric Galaa *

Master of Arts (Teaching Communicative Skills)

Abstract

The paper looked at the effects of non-verbal symbols on interpersonal and intercultural communication in language use, in communication “you cannot not communicate” even in your silent you are communicating. So as a speech community, one needs to be familiar with symbols of communication especially the non-verbal cues. This will promote effective communication and will enhance understanding and peaceful co-existence among members of the speech community. Also, the understanding and appropriate use of non-verbal symbols in interpersonal and intercultural communication is important for effective teaching and learning since members of the school environment may have different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: non-verbal, interpersonal, intercultural, co-existence, symbols

INTRODUCTION

As human beings, we communicate and interact with one another through language. No communicator can ever deny having communicated non-verbally. This is because we have often used non-verbal resources unconsciously (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2000) in our communication. There are many schools of thought regarding the effectiveness of body language in understanding human behavior. In fact, only 20% of our messages gets communicated verbally while 80% is communicated non-verbally (Levy, 2015). Non-verbal communication has a message communicative function in accordance with a large explicit linguistic function, which actualizes an inner process and a meta-communication function. Body actions have the character which actualizes the mental representation that attracts attention and reveals the hidden intention and truth which cannot be read directly from a partner's words (Gamble & Gamble, 2014).

Thus, non-verbal signals are crucial to understanding face-to-face interactions, in order to interpret what is really meant and hidden below the surface. This work therefore seeks

to explore the effects of non-verbal symbols on interpersonal and intercultural communication.

Definition of Concepts (Non-verbal, Intercultural and Interpersonal communication)

Non-verbal communication is expressed through non-linguistic means. It is the actions or attributes of humans, including their appearance, use of objects, sound, time, smell, and space, that have socially shared significance and stimulate meaning in others (Gamble & Gamble, 2014).

Intercultural communication is about interacting with others from cultures different from ours (Ntuli, 2012). Hartley (personal Communication, 1993) describes interpersonal communication to have the following characteristics:

- communication from one individual to another
- communication which is face-to-face
- both the form and content of the communication reflect the personal characteristics of the individuals as well as their social roles and relationships.

Interpersonal communication is a complex process that can be described in simplified terms by a sender and a receiver who exchange messages containing ideas and feelings, mixed together.

Types of Nonverbal Symbols

Non-verbal symbols are representative of actions, events or objects that convey meaning between the sender and the receiver. Non-verbal symbols include visual/kinesics. These are cues which communicate through the movement of either part or the whole of the body. Kinesics may include facial expressions, general body movement and body orientation (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2000). Vocal/paralinguistic cues such as volume, pitch, rate, stress, intonation, and inflection also communicate a lot non-verbally. Proxemic cues refer to how space and distance are used to communicate. For instance, the distance and space between people communicate the kind of relationship that exist between them. According to Gamble & Gamble (2014) four types of distances kept between people and others include: (a) intimate (46cm) (b) personal (1.2m) (c) social (3.7m) and (d) public (12ft+) distance. Olfactory cues tell how smell, thus aroma, stench or odour etc. are used to communicate. Artifactual communication uses personal adornments such as clothing, jewelry, make-up hair style and objects (Gyasi & Bosompem, 2016) to send messages. Chronemic involves the proper use or abuse of time cues to communicate (Gamble & Gamble, 2014). Haptic refers to how physical touch communicates (Heslin, 1974). He categorized haptic movements (touch) into the following levels based on the degree of intimacy: functional/professional, social/polite, friendship/warmth, love/intimacy and sexual arousal levels. Oculesics is the use of eye movement and position to communicate (Gyasi & Bosompem, 2016).

Relationship among Symbols, Signals, Cues & Language

Symbols, signals and cues communicate meaning differently depending on a particular cultural context. For instance, the Japanese are likely to use many types of fillers when they communicate and one of the most common is “Hai/yes”. It does not necessarily mean “yes” but instead used as a bridge between their cluster sentences or just as a sign of understanding and not an affirmative “yes” (Kirkegaard, 2010). One might intentionally display a signal for one receiver only to have it picked up as a different thing by another. That physical symbols can be used as a form of communication is hardly new. The adage, “one picture is worth a 1,000 words,” points to the implicit understanding that objects convey a rich set of meanings. Morgan (1985, p. 29) notes, “symbols provide the medium through which we communicate and engage our realities.”

The concept of language is premised on some consensual and meaningful arrangement of individual elements. Verbal languages are premised on acceptable combinations of letters, words, or sentences, utterances and moves. In a similar fashion, physical symbols can be decomposed into individual elements. For example, elements of attire such as a shirt, a jacket, a tie and a pair of shoes are individual elements that, when put together, properly create an image, or ‘the sentence,’ of a suit. Individual physical symbols alone (e.g., a tie, a shirt, or a ring) can hold meaningful representations similar to elements of verbal speech. Just like verbal symbols, multiple physical symbols can be put together to clarify, bolster, or qualify a point (Fromkin, Rodman, Collins, & Blair, 1988). Both the individual elements and the composite structure bear meanings (Austin, 1962; Tannen, 1981).

Non-verbal cues can contradict or negate verbal messages (Kodom Gyasi & Bosopem, 2016). When this happens, what is said and what is done are at odds. Imagine the man who repeatedly says, “Hold me,” but backs away to avoid being held, or the salesperson that just lost a deal, screaming, “I’m not angry!” (Gamble & Gamble, 2014). Each of these verbal messages is negated by the source’s non-verbal behavior. Each interaction represents a “double-message” (Gamble & Gamble, 2014), the words say one thing, the non-verbal cues, another. Nonverbal language is contextual (physical & sociocultural). A non-verbal cue expressed in one setting may differ in meaning in another. Experiences, perceptions & roles differ from person-to-person & culture to culture. Without verbal, non-verbal communication may be incomplete. Certain gestures should necessarily accompany certain spoken words to make full meaning.

Non-verbal communication plays several roles including: emphasizing or underscoring a verbal message. For example, when you raise or lower your voice, or slow down your rate of speech so you can deliberately stress a series of words, you are using non-verbal cues to accentuate your words. Non-verbal cues can also regulate or control person-to-person interaction. Using non-verbal cues, we establish the rules of order or “turn-taking” during talk. With eye contact, gestures and voice, we control who should speak next and thus direct the flow of verbal exchanges (Schegloff, 2006). Again, non-verbal cues can substitute for or take the place of spoken words. When we don’t know what to say to express our sorrow at the death of a friend or a relative, an embrace often suffices.

Changes & Levels that affect the Health of Interpersonal Communication

Certain changes and their levels can affect effective interpersonal communication if not properly observed. These changes and levels may include: affective (feeling), cognitive (knowledge & understanding) and behavioural (action or skills) levels. The affective level concerns trust, safety and affirmation. The presence of the elements of trust, safety and affirmation or lack thereof may affect effective communication positively or negatively. For instance, a communicative tool is reliable when most instances of it are honest; it is unreliable when it is sometimes honest, but sometimes not. Wearing a wedding ring is an unreliable signal of marital status, for it is not always honest: a ring on a married person's finger is an honest signal, while the same ring on a single person's hand is a deceptive one. When a communication tool is reliable, both senders and receivers' benefit, and the communication system is stable.

The cognitive level also concerns knowledge and understanding of rules, procedures, and expectations which can promote effective communication. According to Hartley (personal Communication, 1993), interpersonal communication is *always two-ways*. The linear model of communication is one of the most popular ways of representing communication in a diagram. This model suggests that our communication is linear and one-way. In other words, it consists of messages flowing from the sender to the receiver along particular channels, although there may be some interference (noise) along the way. This demonstrates the procedures involved in communication between people. Verbal communications, such as filled pauses, back-channel support, spoken discourse markers and turn-taking (Zhang, 2014) forms are some of the rules and expectations which can contribute to effective interpersonal communication.

Behavioral elements certainly affect the health of interpersonal communication positively or negatively. Signal, a non-verbal cue is meant to communicate the quality; its purpose is to alter the receiver's beliefs or behaviors in ways that benefit the signaler. Unintentional cues, or evidence, exist for other reasons and they may provide information detrimental to the one who reveals them.

CONCLUSION

For us, especially users of second language to fully understand the meaning of verbal messages, we also need to understand the meaning of the non-verbal messages that accompany them or occur in their absence. After all, we can change the meaning of our words with the wink of an eye, a certain facial expression, voice tone, bodily movement, use of space, or touch. As our ability to use and interpret non-verbal behavior and contextual cues improve, so will our understanding of interpersonal relationships.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF NON-VERBAL SYMBOLS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON INTERPERSONAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The understanding and appropriate use of non-verbal symbols in interpersonal and intercultural communication is important for effective teaching and learning since members of the school environment may have different cultural backgrounds.

For instance, a learner may use certain body movements (kinesics) or gestures to communicate which could be misinterpreted by another because of cultural or contextual differences. Example the use the thumb by a student or teacher to indicate approval could be misinterpreted.

Also, some touching behaviours (haptics) by teachers or among students can communicate either positively or negatively depending on the haptic movement level or cultural context. For instance, it may be inappropriate for students of the opposite sex to hold each other's waist or a male teacher to scratch the palm of a student girl or a lady teacher as it may lead to sexual arousal.

Proxemics-distance and space may send a positive or negative message to others. Professionals as teachers are, it would be better to keep a social distance with students rather than intimate distance in order to avoid misinterpretations.

Also, it is necessary for a teacher to have eye contact with learners during lesson delivery. However, an excessive eye contact could send a negative message. Also, eye contact or avoidance of it may send mixed messages depending on the cultural context.

As teachers, the way time is used or abused communicates a lot to learners. While some teachers and students may be preoccupied by time, others waste it. Time mismanagement may lead to the loss of contact hours, truancy, and disinterest in learning which may affect performance.

Excessive personal adornment such as clothing, jewelry, make-up, hair style and objects may have effects on teaching and learning. For example, long earrings, excessive make-up and cloths with inscriptions may divert learners' attention. This may negatively affect the performance of students.

The Types of non-verbal symbols discussed above, have implications for teaching and learning. This may be negative or positive depending on their usage. As teachers and students, becoming conscious and cautious of how non-verbal symbols are used will help to improve communication, and hence effective teaching and learning.

It will also enhance understanding and peaceful co-existence among members of a speech community. This will promote cooperation, collaboration and interaction among members in the process of acquiring, creating or sharing of knowledge, as Pica (1994) indicates that interaction promotes conditions and processes that are necessary in SLA.

REFERENCE

- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., Collins, P., & Blair, D. (1988). *An introduction to language*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Gamble, T.K & Gamble M. W (2014). *Interpersonal Communication*. Sage publication.
- Kirkegaard, T. M. (2010). *Analysis of Non-verbal Communication within the Organizational Culture of Japan* (BA Project)

- Kodom Gyasi W. & Bosopem M. (2016). *Lecture notes on Interpersonal and Intercultural Communication*.
- Levy, J. (2015). *Limitations of Non-Verbal Communication and Body Language in Security*. Condor Security Enterprises.
- Morgan, G. (1985). Spinning on symbolism: Some developmental issues in organizational symbolism. *Journal of Management*, 11, 29.
- Wiener, M. & Mehrabian, A. (1968). *Language Within Language: Immediacy, a Channel in Verbal Communication*. New York: Appleton-Century-Croft.
- Ntuli, C.D, (2012). *Intercultural Misunderstanding in South Africa: An Analysis of Nonverbal Communication Behaviour in Context*. University of South Africa, South Africa.
- Pica, T. (1994). Research on negotiation: What learning conditions, processes, outcomes? *Language Learning*, 44, 493-527.
- Richman, T. (1984). *A tale of two companies*. INC.
- Sakyi-Baidoo, Y. (2000). *Learning & Communicating*. Department of English Education: University College of Education, Winneba. City Press Ltd, Accra, Ghana.
- Zhang, Y. (2010). An analysis of spoken discourse between two native speakers. *Review of European Studies*, 2(2), 144.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2006). Interaction: The infrastructure for social institutions, the natural ecological niche for language, and the arena in which culture is enacted. *Roots of human sociality: Culture, cognition and interaction*, 70-96.