**Exploring nonverbal communication**

When someone speaks to us, they communicate through more than their words.  Their nonverbal communication-- bodily actions and vocal qualities-- accompany the message and studies suggest we get more information from their nonverbal responses than we do from their message.  Let’s examine some background information about nonverbal communication and the characteristics of nonverbal communication before quickly reviewing the different types of nonverbal communication and ending with the functions of nonverbal communication and how to better utilize your nonverbal communication.

**First, some useful background on nonverbal communication**

The COMM textbook definition of nonverbal communication is more narrow than many scholars would suggest.  Typically we would define nonverbal communication as  any information, or influence, we communicate without using words.  We communicate nonverbally when we are present, not just when we speak.  About  60% of the **social meaning** of a conversation, however, is created nonverbally and about 90% of a person's **feelings** or **attitude** is communicated nonverbally.  For example, Sally is slouching in her chair and unenthusiastic about every idea for going out.  After a couple of rejected ideas, you probably ask Sally what is wrong.  Nonverbal communication is communication about communication—it is **metacommunication**- that interacts with the verbal message.  For example if someone tells you your paper was the best the person ever read but doesn’t look you in the eye, what would you conclude about the person’s attitude toward your paper?  Usually if the nonverbal and verbal messages contradict, we tend to believe the nonverbal meaning.

**What are the major characteristics of nonverbal communication?**

Nonverbal communication is:

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| 1.  Tied to the situation—nonverbals mean different things in different situations.  For example, you might slurp the last of your milk shake and friends at a fast-food joint after a movie would take that as a sign that you are satisfied with the evening but in a more formal setting that would be perceived as just rude. 2.  Culturally based—nonverbal have  different meanings in different cultures.  For example, the traditional two fingers spread peace sign displayed palm-in got George Bush senior in trouble in Australia in the  early 1990s.  Why?  It’s like “giving someone the finger” in the United States.  The same gesture deliberately displayed in Scotland, cause two “football” players to be thrown out of the league.   |   |

3.   Ambiguous—a behavior can have many different meanings.  Does a friend wrinkle their forehead when you are having a serious conversation because she disagrees with you or because she is thinking? Were the two football players intending to be disrespectful?

4.  Continuous—you are never off stage when it comes to nonverbal communication.  We will interpret your nonverbals even if they are not meant to convey information.

5.  Multi-channeled—you communication nonverbally on more than one channel at a time.  For example you may smile when you are happy to see someone but your voice may not match that smile or you may be slouching in a chair.  These contradictory message are tough for people to interpret.

6.  Rule-guided—within cultures there are rules for what’s appropriate and inappropriate.  For example, Walter Mondale was speaking to the Japanese in the mid 1970s and got upset because everyone closed their eyes.  In Japan, people close their eyes when listening to a speaker to shut out all the distractions and really focus on the message.  Can you think of some rules about giving and listening to speeches in the United States?

**What are the types of nonverbal communication?**

The book covers this in depth, so here is a quick review.

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|   1. **Silence**—not communicating verbally can mean a variety of things from “I’m angry with you” to “I don’t understand.”
2. **Paralanguage**- rate, pitch, volume, vocalized pauses like “uhm,” intonation, and quality of the voice are mined for meaning.
3. **Kinesics** -body language (gestures, posture, facial expression, eye behavior) are commonly attended to in communication.
4. **Object Language**-- your clothing, make-up, jewelry, hair-style (called accessories in the text) tell us who you are.  A cartoon once pictured a heavily tattooed and pierced young man complaining about being unable to find a job.  Those of us who are a little older got the humor better than the teen’s peers.  Appearance matters and he was communicating his “alternative” views very clearly to other generations.
5. **Haptics**- study of touch.  Who gets to touch whom?  Who touches more?
6. **Time-**  are you late or early to appointments?  Cultures use time very differently.  Americans are very “punctual” and will be at an appointment (usually) on time because of our monochronic orientation but people from other countries may not make the appointment because they see people as more important and time as flexible and fluid (polychromic orientation).
7. **Proxemics**—study of space and distance.  This is another one that is highly cultural.  People in many cultures are comfortable communicating with another at what American’s would call the “intimate distance.”  When cultures meet you can literally watch Americans back across the room step by step to get some space.
8. **Territoriality—**when you have a meeting do you have a favorite seat?  Do you mark off your space with your books in a class?
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**What are some of the functions of nonverbal communication?**
The interesting thing about nonverbal communication is how it affects our understanding of the message sent.  Nonverbal communication can:

* **Complement the message-** nonverbal cues complement a message when they add to its meaning.  For example-- when meeting someone, saying  "Hello" with a warm smile—the smile adds to the meaning of the message.  It says, “I am really happy to meet you.”
* **Regulate the message-** nonverbal cues regulate or control verbal communication.  For example you nonverbally tell someone it’s time for a conversation to end  by repeatedly looking at your watch.  You can pull people into a conversation by smiling and nodding at them.
* **Substitute for a verbal message-** nonverbal messages can also replace a verbal message.  For example, many people raise a hand in greeting someone instead of saying hello.  Parents can say no without words either by shaking their head or by their facial expressions.
* **Emphasize part or all of verbal message-** nonverbal messages often emphasize or accent what we are saying.  For example, saying a message slowly will  highlight its importance.  Emphasis on the word “I” in the phrase “ I told you not to do that”  emphasizes the source of the behavior restriction.
* **Assist in impression formation-** nonverbal communication plays an important role in  how we form impressions of others.  Just by looking at or observing a  person we form an idea of him/her.  We look at appearance, body movements, vocal cues, gender, and age  to categorize each other's social and economic status,  ethnic background, and geographical origin.

**How can I improve my use of nonverbal communication?**

* Be conscious of your own nonverbal behavior.  This is especially important in giving speeches!
* Don’t assume what is OK in the United States is OK everywhere else.
* Pay attention to others’ nonverbal communication for clues about how to interpret their messages.
* Adapt to the situation and culture in which you find yourself.  Watch those around you for clues about how to act.
* Remember that nonverbal communication is ambiguous so you may need to use perception checking (from Unit 1)

So, people’s  nonverbal communication, bodily actions and vocal qualities can give us more information than their message.  Nonverbal communication is complex and ambiguous and takes many forms.  Nonverbal communication can significantly affect communication and we can all communicate better if we focus on our  own and others’ nonverbal communication.