

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is also used to influence others and regulate conversational flow. Perhaps even more important are the ways in which nonverbal communication functions as a central part of relational communication and identity expression.

Nonverbal Communication Conveys Meaning

Nonverbal communication conveys meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. In terms of reinforcing verbal communication, gestures can help describe a space or shape that another person is unfamiliar with in ways that words alone cannot. Gestures also reinforce basic meaning—for example, pointing to the door when you tell someone to leave. Facial expressions reinforce the emotional states we convey through verbal communication. For example, smiling while telling a funny story better conveys your emotions (Hargie, 2011). Vocal variation can help us emphasize a particular part of a message, which helps reinforce a word or sentence's meaning. For example, saying "How was your weekend?" conveys a different meaning than "How was your weekend?"

Nonverbal communication can substitute for verbal communication in a variety of ways. Nonverbal communication can convey much meaning when verbal communication isn't effective because of language barriers. Language barriers are present when a person hasn't yet learned to speak or loses the ability to speak. For example, babies who have not yet developed language skills make facial expressions, at a few months old, that are similar to those of adults and therefore can generate meaning (Oster, Hegley, & Nagel, 1992). People who have developed language skills but can't use them because they have temporarily or permanently lost them or because they are using incompatible language codes, like in some cross-cultural encounters, can still communicate nonverbally. Although it's always a good idea to learn some of the local language when you travel, gestures such as pointing or demonstrating the size or shape of something may suffice in basic interactions.

Nonverbal communication is also useful in a quiet situation where verbal communication would be disturbing; for example, you may use a gesture to signal to a friend that you're ready to leave the library. Crowded or loud places can also impede verbal communication and lead people to rely more on nonverbal messages. Getting a server or bartender's attention with a hand gesture is definitely more polite than yelling, "Hey you!"

For example, a person may say, "You can't do anything right!" in a mean tone but follow that up with a wink, which could indicate the person is teasing or joking. Mixed messages lead to uncertainty and confusion on the part of receivers, which leads us to look for more information to try to determine which message is more credible. If we are unable to resolve the discrepancy, we are likely to react negatively and potentially withdraw from the interaction (Hargie, 2011). Persistent mixed messages can lead to relational distress and hurt a person's credibility in professional settings.

5 Functions of Nonverbal Communication

The 5 functions of nonverbal communication are Reinforcement, Substitution, Contradiction, Accentuation, and Regulation. These functions help both the sender and the receiver of a message. We will explain them thoroughly in this section.

1. Reinforcement

This function means that you can use nonverbal communication to duplicate and support a verbal message. This function makes a spoken message more clear to avoid misunderstandings.

When your sister joins a competition, you not only say “good luck.” You hug her. You smile and cheer her on as you say encouraging words. Then, when the competition starts, you not only shout her name. You also wave your hands, clap, and jump to show that you support her. Nonverbal cues confirm the message so that the receiver can understand it well.

Likewise, when you’re mad at your brother, you don’t simply say it. You also frown and raise your voice. In extreme cases, you may even lash out. You clench your fist, stamp your feet as you walk out, and slam the door hard. The combination of your verbal and nonverbal messages confirms your anger.

Now, imagine the scenarios above without the body language. Imagine yourself saying “good luck” to your sister without sounding excited. Imagine telling your brother that you’re mad at him without frowning or raising your voice. You seem like a robot, don’t you? Also, your siblings think that what you say may not be true. This is what the reinforcement function is for. It adds clarity and emotion to your message so the receiver can understand what you mean.

In fact, your nonverbal cues give the meaning and emotion to your verbal message. The meaning of words depends on the sender’s tone and body language. Saying “good luck” with a crossed arm and a low voice can mean you don’t want your sister to win. Saying it with a chuckle and an eye roll can mean that you don’t think she can win.

People use the reinforcement function when applying for jobs. In interviews, employers are very observant of body language and paralanguage. They give clues to your thoughts and emotions because they’re involuntary. So, you should master this function. When you talk, use the correct hand gestures with good timing. Moderate your voice, speak at a good pace, and mind your posture. All this can support your claims of being a good candidate.

Remember that nonverbal cues have different meanings in other countries. This is helpful if you travel a lot. Read about the nonverbal communication in the countries you’re traveling to. This will help you fit in well and stay out of trouble.

2. Substitution

There are times when nonverbal communication is enough to send a message. It can be more expressive and meaningful than words. In many cases, it’s easier to do and understand. Also, it can be performed in various ways, so it’s a versatile communication tool.

Some of the most common substitutions we use are waving our hands instead of saying “hello” or “goodbye.” Oftentimes, we also hold a hand up instead of asking someone to stop talking. When our loved ones break down or lash out, we choose to touch them gently rather than tell them to take it easy. In these scenarios, our nonverbal cues are better tools than words in expressing a message.

Aside from gestures, nonverbal communication is also achieved through eye contact and closeness. For example, if you want a person to leave you alone, you can simply give him an intense stare and move closer to him. We can also see mean people do this. They often take up other people’s space as a way of intimidating them or driving them away. Moving into someone’s space sends a much stronger message than telling them to go away.

One of the best uses of the substitution function is as a solution to language barriers. People use different languages, while others can’t speak at all. Babies, for example, are not able to use words. But, we can observe their reactions and body language to know what they want.

When you visit other countries and cultures, you will rely on nonverbal communication. This is how you make sure you understand what the natives are saying. For example, they act out what they say when they give you directions or explain something that’s new to you.

Nonverbal communication also substitutes words when dealing with heightened emotions. When receiving great news, you often leap in happiness rather than saying, “I’m so happy.” When you get hurt, you will find yourself speechless but in tears. When something shocks you, your body responds with a dropped jaw. You won’t even be able to say a word.

Another useful use of the substitution function is in sensitive situations. Sometimes, words should not be said out loud because of the effect they may have on other people. In these cases, it’s better to give nonverbal cues than to say something. We also use gestures to send silent messages to people that we don’t want others to notice. An example is when we’re attending a meeting or seminar. You use gestures to excuse yourself, so you don’t disturb other attendees.

This function in the 5 functions of nonverbal communication is also useful when your surroundings are noisy or crowded. When you’re in a concert with a friend, you use signs and signals to communicate. The same can be done in restaurants. To avoid disturbing other diners, you signal waiters instead of calling out to them.

Despite all the benefits of this function, we have to be careful in using it. Without words, nonverbal cues can be confusing. They can mean different things to other people. To some degree, they’re subjective because people have different ways of gesturing messages.

3. Contradiction

Verbal and nonverbal communication are two sides of the same coin. But, they sometimes send opposite messages. This is where the contradiction function comes in. It results in mixed messages. You’ve probably heard people tell you that you look terrible; but, they look at you as if you’re a beautiful painting. That means that they’re just teasing you, and they think you’re gorgeous.

Some mixed messages can confuse and even hurt people. Others use contradicting verbal and non-verbal cues to make insults. A classic example of this is sarcasm. Sarcastic people are good at saying the opposite of what they think by contradicting words and paralanguage. When your food tastes bland, they might say, “What a flavorful meal.” The emphasis on flavorful gives the sarcasm away.

Contradictions can also occur unconsciously. Sometimes, we notice people acting differently than what they say. When this happens, we get confused. Our common reaction is to observe their body language and behavior to find out what they mean. For example, your partner might tell you that she’s okay. But, you can notice that she doesn’t enjoy the same things anymore.

In the scenario above, you’ll most likely conclude that she’s lying; she’s not okay. That’s because people trust nonverbal cues more than words. Nonverbal cues are developed way before we learn to speak. Take the substitution function in babies, for example. When we talked about the evolution of communication, gestures, and body language came first before verbal language. Nonverbal communication is more natural. It occurs automatically, so it’s hard to fake. That’s what makes them more believable than the words we say.

If you notice, reading body language is an interesting topic for many. Together with facial expressions, they give clues on whether a person is lying. Knowing when the contradiction function occurs is a powerful tool in reading and handling people.

4. Accentuation

The accentuation function is like an upgrade to the reinforcement function. To accentuate means to put emphasis on something. While the reinforcement function supports the meaning of your words, the accentuation function adds intensity or power to them.

Imagine seeing a friend after a long time. We say to them, “I’m so glad to see you!”. To reinforce our message, we smile and hold them tight. To accentuate it, we say our words louder, we speak with so much excitement, and we smile bigger.

We often observe accentuation when we say something exciting. You remember that time when your friend told you she’s going on a company-paid trip? It’s impossible not to notice that her eyes and smile are wide, and she speaks fast and loud. Her paralanguage and body language give power to her verbal message, “I’m so excited!”.

We also observe this when someone preaches or speaks in campaigns. That person will speak loud and fast, pace across the stage, and use huge hand movements to give power to their words. The accentuation function is like the exclamation mark in our writing. It shows the strength in our words.

5. Regulation

The last part of the 5 functions of nonverbal communication can also be used to regulate the flow of our conversations. The regulation function helps us take turns in speaking, without using any words, so we don’t interrupt others. It helps us send signals when we want a response or when

we're done talking and want someone else to talk. We can use paralanguage, gestures, and eye contact for this function.

Pitch is a useful paralanguage in expressing our intention to ask a question. Raising our pitch or intonation at the end of a sentence cues others that we're asking them. On the other hand, when we lower our pitch, it means our sentence has ended. This tells the audience that they can now clap for your speech.

The volume of our voice and the pauses we take also mean something. Making our voice louder in some parts of our speech means that we need the audience to pay attention to the point we're making. It's like telling the audience that you're now saying the climax or the most important part of your speech. Pausing also gives a signal. It tells your audience to think about what you just said. Pausing gives them time to get your point. This is a very powerful speech tool used by speakers and politicians.

As we talk, we also use our body to direct the audience's attention toward something or someone. For example, when we want to thank someone, we turn our body toward them. Sometimes, we use our hands to ask them to stand up so everyone can see them in the crowd.

We also use body language to send signals when we want to talk or ask others to talk. For example, if you're part of an audience, you may raise your hand to signal that you want to ask or say something. You don't say your intentions out loud because you're going to interrupt the speaker. And as a speaker, you also use your body language to signal the next speaker to prepare to take over.

Gestures are also useful in signaling people that you need more time to speak. When you're conducting a seminar, you can use hand gestures to tell the host to extend your time. If you're using slides in your seminar, hand gestures are also useful in asking someone to go to the next slide. This regulates the flow of your speech without interrupting it.

You may notice that some of the examples are substitution functions. Yes, they are; and the nonverbal substitutions you make can be used to regulate your speech. That's why they're written in this section. The regulation function is very helpful in formal speeches. It's also helpful when you facilitate conversations as long as the meaning of the nonverbal cues you make is the same to everyone involved.

Conclusion

Nonverbal communication is a versatile, useful, and powerful tool. It works with verbal communication to help us send clear and strong messages. It's very helpful in avoiding misunderstandings that affect conversations and relationships among people. The 5 functions of nonverbal communication above prove this.

You have to be knowledgeable in using nonverbal communication. Mastery of this tool can help you become a better speaker and a person for that matter. It can help you lead good and meaningful conversations. It can also help you express your intentions and deliver your messages better.

Remember that it can cause misunderstandings, too. People give different meanings to nonverbal cues. So, it's a good tip to know your audience before you speak. Be careful in using nonverbal communication because it's very hard to fake. Be clear on your intentions and work hard to be a better communicator.