

# Nonverbal Messages



When you've finished this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Describe the major characteristics of nonverbal messages.
- Identify the types of nonverbal messages we use to communicate.
- Employ strategies to improve your nonverbal communication as both a sender and receiver.

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Start with a quick warm-up activity.

### Take I: The Verbal Exchange

Amber enters the apartment.

**Amber:** "I'm home. Are we going to dinner soon?"

**Louisa:** "Uh huh."

**Amber:** "Good, because I'm starving. I worked so long in the Chem lab that I completely missed lunch and had to make do with a stale granola bar I found at the bottom of my backpack."

**Louisa:** "Uh huh."

**Amber:** "Hey, I've been thinking about spring break. What would you think about doing an alternative spring break? Student government is sponsoring three different trips and one is to Haiti. I thought we could do some good and get some sun. What do you think?"

**Louisa:** "Whatever."

**[Amber thinks:** *Wow. What'd I do wrong this time? Sometimes I just don't understand her.*]

# 5



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What just happened? From the verbal transcript alone it's hard to tell. Now let's look at another account of the conversation; one that includes both the verbal and nonverbal messages involved.

### Take II: The Nonverbal and Verbal Exchange

Amber enters the apartment to find Louisa sitting at the kitchen table typing furiously on her laptop. Books and papers are piled all around her.

"I'm home. Are we going to dinner soon?" Amber asks, smiling brightly as she drops her backpack on the floor and flops down on the futon across the room and turns on the TV.

"Uh huh," mumbles Louisa as she furrows her eyebrows, hunches closer to the computer screen, and continues typing furiously.

"Good, because I'm starving," Amber says. "I worked so long in the Chem lab that I completely missed lunch. All I've had to eat today is a stale granola bar I found at the bottom of my backpack."

"Uh huh," Louisa mutters as she takes a deep breath, sighs loudly, and continues typing with her eyes focused intently on the screen.

Noticing the commercial for a three-day cruise to the Bahamas, Amber recalls an idea and exclaims, "Hey Louisa, I've been thinking about doing an alternative spring break. Student Government is sponsoring a service trip to Haiti. I thought we could do some good and get some sun. What do you think? Want to go?" Amber gets up from the futon and plops down next to Louisa, sending books and papers flying.

"Whatever," Louisa shouts as she bangs her laptop closed, gathers her papers, and storms out of the room.

[“Wow,” Amber wonders with astonishment as she stares wide-eyed at the door Louisa just slammed shut. “*What'd I do wrong this time? Sometimes I just don't understand her.*”]

Amber had completely ignored the nonverbal messages Louisa was sending and that lead to misunderstandings and hurt feelings. The last chapter focused on the verbal messages we send to communicate thoughts and feelings. This chapter is dedicated to **nonverbal communication**, which consists of all the messages we send in ways that transcend spoken or written words (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan 2014). More specifically, **nonverbal messages** are cues we send with our body, voice, space, time, and appearance to support, modify, contradict, or even replace a verbal message.

Nonverbal messages play an important role in communication. In fact, research suggests that 65–90 percent of meaning comes from the nonverbal messages we use to communicate in face-to-face interactions (Burgoon & Bacue, 2003; Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Mehrabian, 1972). In fact, it is difficult to separate verbal and nonverbal messages since they operate simultaneously as we communicate (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). As we can see from Amber's and Louisa's conversation, interpreting nonverbal messages accurately is critical to understanding and responding appropriately to what others are “saying.”

The widespread use of social media and smart phone technology to communicate today (e.g., e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, texting) emphasizes the important role of nonverbal messages. Because these modes force us to rely only on words, we often use emoticons, all capital letters and acronyms like LOL to represent the nonverbal messages

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Read, highlight, and take notes online.

### nonverbal communication

all the messages we send in ways that transcend spoken or written words

### nonverbal messages

cues we send with our body, voice, space, time, and appearance to communicate

### APPLY IT

Identify a time when someone misinterpreted the meaning of a text or e-mail message you sent. In hindsight, what emoticons, acronyms, or other techniques might you have used to represent nonverbal cues to clarify meaning?

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we would employ in face-to-face communication (Yuasa, Saito, & Mukawa, 2011) (Photo 5.1).

We begin this chapter by briefly describing the characteristics of nonverbal communication. Next, we identify the types of nonverbal messages we use to communicate with others, including use of body (kinesics), use of voice (paralanguage), use of space (proxemics), use of time (chronemics), and appearance (including clothing and grooming). Finally, we offer suggestions for improving nonverbal messages as both senders and receivers.



Ei Katsumata—CMC/Alamy

## Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

We use nonverbal messages to emphasize, substitute for, or contradict verbal messages. We also use nonverbal messages to cue a sender to continue, repeat, elaborate, or finish up what he or she is saying. And, whether we do so intentionally or not, our nonverbal messages give people an impression of who we are. The challenge of conveying and interpreting nonverbal messages accurately is rooted in four fundamental characteristics.

1. **Nonverbal communication is *inevitable*.** The phrase “We cannot NOT communicate” (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967) captures the essence of this characteristic. If you are in the presence of someone else, your nonverbal messages (whether intentional or not) are communicating. When Austin yawns and stares off into the distance during class, one classmate might interpret this nonverbal message as a sign of boredom, another might see it as a sign of fatigue, and yet another may view it as a message of disrespect. Meanwhile, Austin may be oblivious to all of the messages his behavior is sending.
2. **Nonverbal communication is the primary conveyer of emotions.** We interpret how others feel based almost entirely on their nonverbal messages. In fact, some research suggests that an overwhelming 93 percent of a message’s emotional meaning is conveyed nonverbally (Mehrabian, 1972). So, when Janelle frowns, clenches her fists, and forcefully says, “I am NOT angry!” her sister is likely to ignore the verbal message and believe the contradicting nonverbal messages, which communicate that Janelle is actually very angry.
3. **Nonverbal communication is *multi-channeled*.** We perceive meaning from a combination of nonverbal behaviors including, for example, posture, gestures, facial expressions, vocal pitch and rate, and appearance. So, when Anna observes her daughter Mimi’s failure to sustain eye contact, her bowed head, and her repetitive toe-stubbing in the dirt, she may decide that Mimi is lying when she says she did not hit her brother. The fact that nonverbal communication is multi-channeled is one reason people are more likely to believe nonverbal communication when nonverbal messages contradict the verbal message (Burgoon, Blair, & Strom, 2008).

**Photo 5.1** Nonverbal communication is so important that we have developed emoticons, acronyms, and avatars to represent it in computer-mediated and text messages. What emoticons and acronyms do you use when communicating online?

### APPLY IT

List all the situations in which you text, check e-mail, or use Snapchat, Instagram, or Facebook. For example, when you’re hanging out with your friends, having dinner with parents or grandparents, at the movies, during a lecture at school, etc. How might your nonverbal behaviors be interpreted by others in each of these situations?

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4. **Nonverbal communication is *ambiguous*.** Very few nonverbal messages mean the same thing to everyone. The meaning of one nonverbal behavior can vary based on culture, sex, gender, and even context or situation. For example, in the dominant American culture, direct eye contact tends to be understood as a sign of respect. That's why parents often tell their children, "Look at me when I'm talking to you." In some cultures, however, direct eye contact might be interpreted as disrespectful. Not only can the meaning of nonverbal messages vary among different cultures, but the meaning of the same nonverbal message also can differ based on the situation. For example, a furrowed brow might convey Byron's confusion when he did not understand his professor's explanation of the assignment, or Monica's anger when she discovered she did not get the internship she had worked so hard for, or Max's disgust when he was dissecting a frog during biology lab.

## Types of Nonverbal Communication

We use various types of nonverbal messages to communicate. These include the use of body (kinesics), voice (vocalics/paralanguage), space (proxemics), time (chronemics), and appearance.

### Use of Body: Kinesics

#### kinesics

*what and how body motions communicate*

#### gestures

*movements of our hands, arms, and fingers to communicate*

#### emblems

*gestures that substitute entirely for a word or words*

#### illustrators

*gestures that clarify the verbal message*

#### adaptors

*unconscious responses to physical or psychological needs*

#### eye contact (oculesics)

*how and how much we look at others when communicating*

**Kinesics** is the technical name for what and how the body communicates (Birdwhistell, 1970). We may use gestures, eye contact, facial expression, posture, and touch.

**Gestures** **Gestures** are the movements of our hands, arms, and fingers. We use **emblems** to substitute entirely for a word or words. For example, when we raise a finger and place it vertically across our lips, it signifies "Be quiet." We use **illustrators** to clarify the verbal message. When we say "about this high" or "nearly this round," we are likely to use a gesture to clarify what we mean. We also often use gestures to emphasize our emotional stance. For example, when expressing anger or frustration, we might also clench our fists. Particularly when giving formal speeches, we may use gestures to signal moving from one main point to the next, as well as to make reference to a presentational aid. Some gestures, called **adaptors**, are unconscious responses to physical or psychological needs. For example, we may scratch an itch, adjust our glasses, or jingle the keys in our pocket. In these cases, we probably don't intend to communicate, but others may notice and attach meaning to them (Lakin, 2006).

The use and meaning of gestures can vary greatly across cultures. For example, the American hand sign for "OK" has an obscene sexual meaning in some European countries, means "worthless" in France, is a symbol for money in Japan, and stands for "I'll kill you" in Tunisia (Axtell, 1998). Similarly, in the dominant American culture, people nod their heads to communicate "I am listening to you." In some parts of India, however, they shift their heads from side to side to demonstrate they are listening. When communicating with people coming from different cultures, be especially careful about the gestures you use; their meaning is not necessarily universal (Photo 5.2).

**Eye Contact** The technical term for **eye contact** is oculistics. It has to do with how and how much we look at others when communicating.

What is considered appropriate eye contact varies across cultures. Studies show that in Western cultures, talkers hold eye contact about 40 percent of the time and listeners nearly

### APPLY IT

Name someone you know who uses a lot of gestures when talking. Does it enhance the message or distract from it? Why?

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70 percent of the time (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). In Western cultures people also generally maintain more eye contact when discussing topics they are comfortable with, when they are genuinely interested in what another person is saying, and when they are trying to persuade others. Conversely, they tend to avoid eye contact when discussing topics that make them feel uncomfortable, when they aren't interested in the topic or the person talking, or when they are embarrassed, ashamed, or trying to hide something.

In the dominant American culture, people tend to expect those with whom they are communicating to “look them in the eye.” It tends to signal respect and that we are paying attention. But direct eye contact is not universally considered appropriate (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012). For instance, in Japan, prolonged eye contact is considered rude, disrespectful, and threatening. Similarly, in China and Indonesia, too much direct eye contact is a sign of bad manners. In many Middle Eastern countries, people tend to use continuous and direct eye contact with others to demonstrate keen interest.

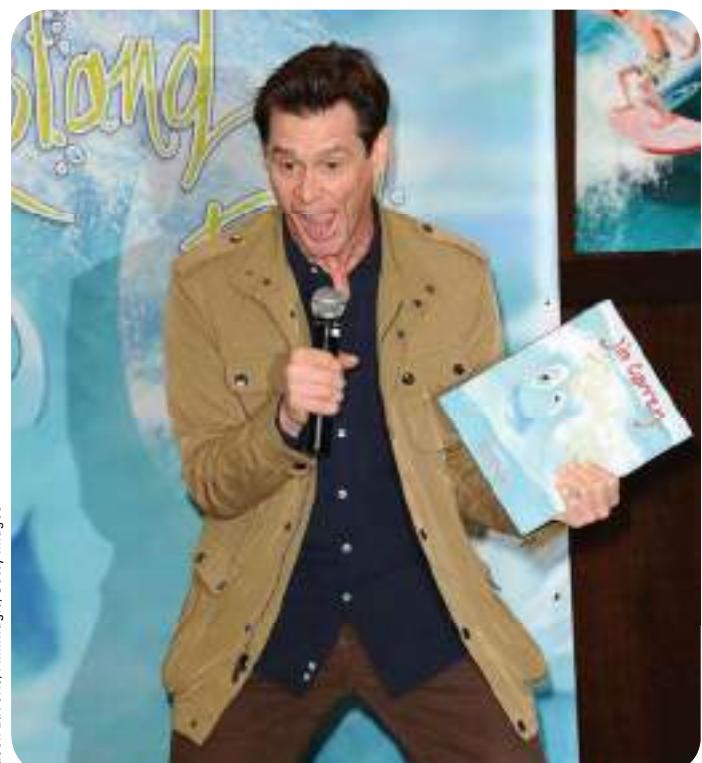
Various co-cultural groups within the United States use eye contact differently, as well. For instance, African Americans tend to use more continuous eye contact than European Americans when they are speaking, but less when they are listening (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012). Native Americans tend to avoid eye contact when communicating with superiors as a sign of respect for their authority. And women tend to use more eye contact during conversations than men do (Santilli & Miller, 2011; Wood, 2007).

**Facial Expression** **Facial expression** is using facial muscles to convey emotions (Photo 5.3). For example, we may furrow our brows and squint our eyes when we are confused, or purse our lips and raise one eyebrow to convey skepticism. Facial expressions are so important for communicating emotions that we often use smiley face ☺, sad face ☹, and winking face emoticons ;) to represent emotions when texting, sending e-mail, or using other forms of social media. Emoticons have actually been in use since 1982 when Scott Fahlman, a computer science professor at



**Photo 5.2** The same nonverbal cue can mean very different things in different cultures. What does this gesture mean to you?

**facial expression**  
using facial muscles to communicate emotions



**Photo 5.3** Comedic actors often use a lot of facial expressions to convey emotions. What is being communicated here?

Carnegie Melon University, first combined a colon, hyphen, and parenthesis to represent a smiley face (Walther & Parks, 2002).

Unlike gestures and eye contact, many facial expressions mean something similar across cultures (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy 2012). For instance, a slight raising of the eyebrow communicates recognition and wrinkling one's nose conveys repulsion (Martin & Nakayama, 2006). However, whether or not doing so is appropriate may vary across cultures and co-cultures. For instance, in some cultures, people downplay facial expressions like frowning and smiling; whereas members of other cultures amplify emotional meaning through facial expressions.

**posture**

how we position and move our body

**body orientation**

how we position our body in relation to other people

**body movement**

changing body position

**haptics**

what and how touch communicates

**Posture** **Posture** is how we position and move our body. Posture can communicate attentiveness, respect, and dominance. **Body orientation** refers to how we position our body in relation to other people. *Direct body orientation* is when two people face each other squarely and *indirect body orientation* is when two people sit or stand side-by-side. Direct body orientation tends to signal attentiveness and respect. In a job interview, for example, we are likely to sit up straight and face the interviewer directly. **Body movement** is changing body position. It can be motivated (movement that helps clarify meaning) or unmotivated (movement that distracts listeners from the point being made). When making a speech, an upright stance and squared shoulders communicates poise and confidence. Taking a few steps to the left or right can signal a transition from one main point to the next, but pacing may actually distract listeners from the message.

**Touch** **Haptics** is the technical term for what and how touch communicates. We may pat, hug, slap, kiss, pinch, stroke, or embrace others.

There are three types of touch: spontaneous touch, ritualized touch, and task-related touch. *Spontaneous touch* is automatic and subconscious. Patting someone on the back after learning that he or she won an award is an example of spontaneous touch. *Ritualized touch* is scripted rather than spontaneous. Handshakes, high-fives, and fist bumps are examples of ritualized touch. *Task-related touch* is used to perform a certain unemotional function. For instance, a doctor may touch a patient during a physical examination or a personal trainer may touch a client during a gym workout.

Some people like to touch and be touched and others do not. Touching behavior that seems innocuous to one person may be perceived as overly intimate or threatening to another. Moreover, touch that is considered appropriate in a private situation may be perceived as inappropriate in public contexts (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014).

Touching behavior is also highly correlated with culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Frequent touching is considered normal in some cultures and inappropriate in others. Some countries in South and Central America, as well as southern Europe may engage in frequent touching (Neuliep, 2006). Many Eastern cultures, on the other hand, do not engage in touching behavior, particularly in public contexts. Because the United States is a country of immigrants, the degree of touching behavior considered appropriate varies widely from individual to individual based on family heritage and norms.

**APPLY IT**

Did you grow up in a household where people frequently hugged to say hello and goodbye? How does that norm translate when you meet people with a different hugging norm? Explain.

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## Use of Voice: Paralanguage

**paralanguage (vocalics)**  
the voiced part of a spoken message that goes beyond the actual words

**Paralanguage** (also known as *vocalics*) is the voiced part of a spoken message that goes beyond the actual words. Six characteristics of paralanguage are pitch, volume, rate, quality, intonation, and vocalized pauses.

**Pitch** **Pitch** is the highness or lowness of vocal tone. We raise and lower our pitch to signal a question, to emphasize ideas, and to convey emotions. We may raise our pitch when feeling nervous or afraid. We may lower our pitch to convey sadness (as in a speech given at a funeral) or force (as when a parent scolds a child for misbehaving).

**pitch**  
highness or lowness of  
vocal tone

**Volume** **Volume** is the loudness or softness of vocal tone. Some people have booming voices that carry long distances and others are soft-spoken. Regardless of our normal volume level, however, we also tend to vary our volume depending on the situation, the topic of discussion, and emotional intent. For example, we might talk louder when we wish to be heard in noisy settings and when we are angry. We might speak softer when we are being reflective or romantic. There are also some cultural variations in the meanings attached to volume. For example, some Middle Easterners tend to speak with a great deal of volume to convey strength and sincerity; whereas soft voices tend to be preferred in Britain, Japan, and Thailand (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012).

**volume**  
loudness or softness of  
vocal tone

**Rate** **Rate** is the speed at which a person speaks. Most people in the United States naturally speak between 100 and 200 words per minute. People tend to talk more rapidly when they are happy, frightened, nervous, or excited and more slowly when they are problem-solving out loud, emphasizing an important idea, or sad. People who speak too slowly run the risk of boring listeners, and those who speak too quickly may not be understood.

**rate**  
the speed at which  
a person speaks

**Quality (Timbre)** **Quality** is the sound of a person's voice that distinguishes it from others. Voice quality may be breathy (Marilyn Monroe), strident (Joan Rivers or Marge Simpson), throaty (Morgan Freeman or Jack Nicholson), or nasal (Fran Drescher in *The Nanny*). Although each person's voice has a distinct quality, too much breathiness can make people sound frail, too much stridence can make them seem hypertense, too much throatiness can make them seem cold and unsympathetic, and too much nasality can make them sound immature or unintelligent.

**quality**  
the sound of a person's voice  
that distinguishes it from others

**Intonation** **Intonation** is the variety and inflection in one's voice. Voices that use very little or no intonation are described as monotone and tend to bore listeners. If you've ever seen the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, you may recall the teacher (played by Ben Stein) who is portrayed as boring via a monotone voice as he questions the class: "Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?" Voices that use a lot of intonation may be perceived as ditzy, sing-songy, or childish. People prefer to listen to voices that use a moderate amount of intonation.

**intonation**  
the variety and inflection in  
one's voice

In the United States, there are stereotypes about masculine and feminine voices. Masculine voices are expected to be low-pitched and loud, with moderate to low intonation; feminine voices are expected to be higher-pitched, softer in volume, and more expressive. Although both sexes have the option to portray a range of masculine and feminine paralanguage, most people usually conform to the expectations for their sex (Wood, 2007).

**vocalized pauses**  
extraneous sounds or words  
that interrupt fluent speech

**Vocalized Pauses** **Vocalized Pauses** are extraneous sounds or words that interrupt fluent speech. They are essentially "place markers" designed to fill in momentary gaps while we search for the right word or idea. The most common vocalized pauses are "uh," "er," "well," "OK," "you know," and "like." We all use some vocalized pause words and phrases. However, when used excessively, vocalized pauses can give others the impression that we are unsure of ourselves. Sometimes speakers use so many vocalized pauses that listeners are distracted by them to the point of not being able to concentrate on the meaning of the message.

## APPLY IT

How do your pitch, volume, rate, and intonation change when expressing anger with a friend or family member? When expressing excitement? When expressing disappointment?

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## Use of Space: Proxemics

**Proxemics** refers to how space and distance communicate (Hall, 1968). We communicate through our use of personal space, territorial space, and acoustic space.

**Personal space** **Personal space** is the distance we try to maintain when interacting with others. How much space we perceive as appropriate depends on our individual preference, the nature of the relationship, and cultural norms (Photo 5.4). With these variations in mind, the amount of personal space we view as appropriate generally decreases as the intimacy of our relationship increases.

For example, in the dominant American culture, four distinct distances are generally perceived as appropriate based on the context and relationship. *Intimate distance* is defined as up to 18 inches and is appropriate for private conversations between close friends. *Personal distance*, from 18 inches to 4 feet, is the space in which casual conversation occurs. *Social distance*, from 4 to 12 feet, is where impersonal business such as a job interview is conducted. *Public distance* is anything more than 12 feet (Hall, 1968).

When “outsiders” violate our personal space, we tend to become uncomfortable. For instance, in a sparsely populated movie theater, people tend to leave one or more seats empty between themselves and others they do not know. If a stranger sits right next to us in such a setting, we are likely to feel uncomfortable and may even move to another seat. We will accept intrusions into our personal space only in certain settings and then only when all involved follow the unwritten rules. For example, we tend to tolerate being packed into a crowded elevator or subway by following unwritten rules, such as standing rigidly, looking at the floor or above the door, and not making eye contact with others.

**Territorial Space** **Territorial space** is the physical space over which we claim ownership. As with personal space, we expect others to respect our territory and may feel annoyed or even violated when they do not. Sometimes we do not realize how we are claiming or “marking” our territory. For example, Graham may have subconsciously marked “his chair” in the family room and others just know not to sit in it when Graham is around. Other times we mark our territory quite consciously, for example, by using locks, signs, and fences. Territorial space can also communicate status. To clarify, higher-status people generally claim larger and more prestigious territory (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). In business, for example, the supervisor is likely to have the largest and nicest office in the unit.

We often use **artifacts**—or objects—to mark our territory. We display things on our desks and in our offices and homes, not just for their function but also because they communicate about our territory in some way. For example, we use artifacts to signal what we expect to happen in the space. The chairs and couch in your living room may approximate a circle that invites people to sit down and talk. Classroom seating may be arranged in auditorium style to discourage conversation. A manager’s office with a chair facing the manager across the desk encourages formal conversation and signals status.

**Photo 5.4** Why might these men find it rude if you backed away?

### proxemics

how space and distance communicate

### personal space

the distance we try to maintain when interacting with others

### APPLY IT

Try conversing with a friend while standing closer than deemed appropriate for a casual conversation. What do they do or say as a result?

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### territorial space

the physical space over which we claim ownership

### artifacts

objects we use to mark our territory

It says, “Let’s talk business—I’m the boss and you’re the employee.” A manager’s office with a chair placed at the side of her desk encourages more informal conversation. It says, “Don’t be nervous—let’s just chat.”

**Acoustic space** **Acoustic space** is the area over which our voice can be comfortably heard. Competent communicators protect acoustic space by adjusting the volume of our voices to be easily heard by our conversational partners and not overheard by others. Loud cell phone conversations occurring in public places violate acoustic space. With the invention of Bluetooth technology, this problem has become even more pronounced. This is why some communities have ordinances prohibiting cell phone use in restaurants, hospitals, and theaters.

## Use of Time: Chronemics

Recall that **chronemics** is how we interpret the use of time and it is largely based on cultural norms. Just as cultures tend to be more monochronic or polychronic, so too are individuals. If your approach to time is different from those with whom you are interacting, your behavior could be viewed as inappropriate and put strains on your relationship. When Carlos, who is polychronic, regularly arrives late to meetings with his monochromic teammates, they might resent his tardiness and perceive him to be full of himself, disrespectful, or perhaps as a slacker. In this chapter’s *Diverse Voices*, Charles Okigbo offers his personal example of moving from what he calls “African time” to “American time.”

### APPLY IT

If someone were to enter your office, dorm room, or home for the first time, what might they conclude about you based on the artifacts they see and where those artifacts are placed?



**acoustic space**  
the area over which our voice  
can be comfortably heard

**chronemics**  
how we interpret the use of time

DIVERSE  
VOICES

Changing Times

**by Charles Okigbo**

Professor of Communication, North Dakota State University and Head, Policy Engagement & Communication African Population and Health Research Center Nairobi, Kenya

It is ironic that time is universal in the sense that every society understands the passage of time as it is connected to growth, aging, and transitions from one life stage to another. And yet, the concept of time also varies from one society to another. I have experienced this similar, yet varying sense of time in my own life, as I grew up in Nigeria, came to the United States for higher education, and have traveled between the United States and different African countries. In much of Africa, there are two time modes—cultural time, which is imprecise, and Western, or as we call it in Nigeria, “English” time. In Nigeria, we call this precise clock-based accounting for time “English time” because the British colonized us.

Other African countries that had different colonists might call it by a different name. Time in much of traditional Africa is seen as an inexhaustible resource that flows endlessly and is hardly in short supply. Growing up in my Igbo village in southeastern Nigeria, the setting for Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, I saw my people mark time with the rising and setting of the sun. Longer periods were marked by the rainy and dry seasons, and people’s ages were gauged by historic events such as the world wars, the invasion of locusts, or the British colonialists’ confiscation of all guns. Such loose characterization meant that precision was not possible. I vividly remember my people saying that a morning meeting would start “after sunrise” or “at the first cockcrow” or “after the morning market.” Whereas this might appear confusing to Western time observers, to us, it presented no problems at all.

My first experience with Western (a.k.a. “English”) time was when I went to kindergarten and later

*continued*

elementary school. We were taught to be punctual, and tardiness exacted strict sanctions, usually severe flogging. The severity of the punishment depended on how late one came to school.

When I came to the United States for graduate studies at Ohio University, I was already comfortable with Western time and never had any problem with punctuality. In fact, many Africans in the United States are often hypersensitive about punctuality issues and tend to be too punctual. This may be a case of overcompensating to avoid relapsing to cultural time. The adjustment to Western time can present some challenges, especially in situations when we have exclusive African events in the United States. For example, I remember as an African student and teacher in the United States, many meetings organized by Nigerian or other African students hardly ever started “on time” by Western standards because we often relapsed to our cultural time for exclusively African events.

So, we seem capable of successfully weaving in and out of cultural time depending on our expectation of whether the occasion is for Africans only or for Africans and “others.” When the “others” are people with Western time orientation, we make every effort to be punctual. But when they are people who seem to share our sense of time, we respond accordingly. This represents a chronemics co-orientation, by which I mean that unconsciously we size up the other to know where to position them on the continuum of “cultural” and “Western” time. If they are closer to the former, we expect them to have a more relaxed approach to time, but if they are closer to the latter, we try to be punctual and seriously time conscious in dealing with them.

The tendency is for people to adjust their sense of time depending on the situation or the

expectation of the audience. Professional meetings, conferences, even appointments with doctors or lawyers are loosely treated depending on one’s expectations of how the other side sees time.

I must say that we Africans are not the only ones who could benefit from engaging in chronemics co-orientation. People who are usually Western in their approach to keeping appointments may decide not to be so punctual if they expect the other party will keep them waiting. For example, sometimes Africans may need to adjust to the precision of Western time, and at other times, Europeans and Americans who are dealing with exclusive African groups should consider adjusting to cultural time.

I have noticed that many African Americans in the United States are similar to Africans from the continent with respect to time consciousness, and many Native Americans in North Dakota and Minnesota share a similar cultural time orientation. So when African Americans host a party where most of the guests are also African American, the invitation may state that the party starts at 7:00 p.m., but most guests may not arrive until after 9:30 p.m.

While both cultural time and Western time continue to guide human behavior, increasing globalization and the information technological revolution are dictating a global approach to time that runs by the precision of the clock rather than by the natural rhythms of the rising or setting of the sun or the beginning or ending of seasons. Whether this move is ultimately in the best interest of humankind remains to be seen.

*Source: By Charles Okigbo, Professor of Communication, North Dakota State University. Used with permission.*

## Physical Appearance

**physical appearance**  
how we look to others

**Physical appearance** is how we look to others and is one of the first things others notice and judge. The dominant American culture places so much emphasis on physical appearance that entire industries are devoted to it. Options for changing our physical appearance range from surgical procedures to weight loss programs and products to cosmetics and clothing lines.

Today, more than ever, people use clothing choices, body art, and other personal grooming to communicate who they are and what they stand for (Insert Photo 5.5). Likewise,

when we meet someone, we are likely to form our first impression of them based on how they are dressed and groomed. Thus, we can influence how others are likely to perceive us by our clothing and grooming choices. For example, Marcus, a successful sales representative, typically wears dress slacks and a collared shirt to the office, a suit and tie when giving a formal presentation, and a graphic T-shirt and jeans when hanging out with friends. Body art (such as piercings and tattoos) is quite popular in the United States today. Although body art can be an important means of self-expression, we often make choices about how much of it to display based on the situation and how others are likely to judge us based on it. For example, when Tiffany is at work she dresses conservatively and covers the tattoo on her arm by wearing long-sleeved blouses. But on evenings and weekends, she does not. The *Communicating in the World* feature that follows points out some important considerations regarding body art and how it communicates.



**Photo 5.5** People use appearance to communicate about themselves and groups they identify with. What are some things this hipster may be saying about him/herself through clothing and personal grooming?

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Photo 5.5 People use appearance to communicate about themselves and groups they identify with. What are some things this hipster may be saying about him/herself through clothing and personal grooming?

## COMMUNICATING IN THE WORLD



Since ancient times, people have been painting, piercing, tattooing, and shaping their bodies. In fact, there is no culture that didn't or doesn't use body art to signal people's place in society, mark a special occasion, or just make a fashion statement (American Museum of Natural History, 1999). Body art is also a poignant form of nonverbal communication.

For centuries, Eastern cultures have used henna to dye hands and other body parts to communicate rites of passage such as marriages. Similarly, traditional Indian women may wear a *bindi* (a red spot or a piece of jewelry between their eyebrows) to indicate they are married. Women often use cosmetics, sports fans paint their faces and bodies, and some people

## Body Art and Nonverbal Communication

choose to pierce body parts or get tattoos to communicate an aspect of who they are or what they believe.

Tattooing is actually the oldest form of body art and tattooed mummies have been found in various parts of the world. Celebrities, soccer moms, corporate executives, star athletes, and high school students may sport tattoos as statements of individuality or group solidarity. Some people have tattoos strategically placed so that they can choose to display them or hide them from view depending on the self image they want to portray in different settings. Certainly, body art is very often not only art, but a powerful form of nonverbal communication.

**When you see someone who has taken body art to an extreme, what do you think? How does this affect your interaction with this person?**

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## Guidelines for Improving Nonverbal Communication

Because nonverbal messages are inevitable, multi-channeled, ambiguous, and sometimes unintentional, interpreting them accurately can be tricky. Add to this the fact that the meaning of any nonverbal behavior can vary by situation and culture, and the reasons we so often misinterpret the nonverbal communication of others becomes clear. The following guidelines can help improve the likelihood that your nonverbal messages will be perceived accurately and that you will accurately interpret the nonverbal messages of others.

### Sending Nonverbal Messages

1. **Consciously monitor your nonverbal messages.** Try to be more consciously aware of the nonverbal messages you send through your use of body, voice, space, time, and appearance. If you have difficulty doing this, ask a friend to point them out to you.
2. **Intentionally align your nonverbal messages with your purpose.** When nonverbal messages contradict verbal messages, people are more likely to believe the nonverbal messages, so it is important align your nonverbal messages with your purpose. If you want to be persuasive, use direct eye contact, a serious facial expression, an upright posture, a commanding vocal tone with no vocalized pauses, and professional clothing and grooming. If you want to be supportive and convey empathy, you might use less direct eye contact, a more relaxed facial expression, a softer voice, a nonthreatening touch, and a lean inward toward your partner.
3. **Adapt your nonverbal messages to the situation.** Just as you make language choices to suit different situations, so should you do so with nonverbal messages. Assess what the situation calls for in terms of use of body, voice, space, time, and appearance. For example, you would not dress the same way for a wedding as you would for a workout.
4. **Reduce or eliminate distracting nonverbal messages.** Fidgeting, tapping your fingers on a table, pacing, mumbling, using lots of pauses, and checking your phone often for texts and e-mails can distract others from the message you are trying to convey (Photo 5.6). Make a conscious effort to learn what distracting nonverbal messages have become habitual for you and work to eliminate them from your communication with others.



Gogo Images/Jupiter Images

## Interpreting Nonverbal Messages

1. **Remember that the same nonverbal message may mean different things to different people.** Most nonverbal messages have multiple meanings that vary from person to person, culture to culture, and even situation to situation. Just because you fidget when you are bored, doesn't mean that others are bored when they fidget. What you perceive as an angry vocal tone might not be intended as such by the person talking. So always try to consider multiple interpretations of the nonverbal messages you receive and seek clarification, particularly when your first interpretation is negative. This guideline becomes even more important when interpreting messages sent via social media and technology. For example, when Larissa read her brother's text, "CALL ME!", rather than jump to any conclusions, she interpreted his meaning as urgent and stepped into the hallway to call him right away to seek clarification rather than waiting until later.
2. **Consider each nonverbal message in context.** Because any one nonverbal message can mean different things in different contexts, take the time to consider how it is intended in a given situation. Also realize that you might not understand all the details of the situation. For example, if you see a classmate sleeping during



## COMMUNICATE ON YOUR FEET

### Communicating Emotions Nonverbally: Encoding and Decoding Skill and Practice

#### The Assignment

Your instructor will display a simple sentence for you to recite to your classmates while attempting to convey a particular emotion nonverbally. First, you will use only your voice; then you will use your voice and face; and finally you will use your voice, face, and body. The sentence could be as simple as "I had bacon and eggs for breakfast this morning."

1. Draw a card from a stack offered by your instructor. Without letting your classmates see, turn the card over to read what emotion is written on the front. Some possible emotions include *anger*, *excitement*, *fear*, *joy*, *worry*, and *sadness*. Consider how you will use vocalics and kinesics to convey that emotion.
2. When your instructor calls on you, go to the front of the classroom and shield your face with a piece of paper (so that your classmates cannot

### Speech Assignment

see your face). Try to convey that emotion with only your voice while saying the sentence with your back to the class.

3. The class might make some guesses about the emotion you are conveying and give some reasons for their guesses. You should not tell them whether they are correct at this point.
4. Turn around to face your classmates and say the sentence again, this time trying to reinforce the emotion with your face and eyes.
5. The class might again make some guesses.
6. Repeat the sentence once more, this time using your voice, face, and body to convey the emotion.
7. The class might again make some guesses.
8. Tell them the emotion that was on the card and what you did with your voice, face, and body to convey it.
9. Your instructor may lead a discussion about what worked and didn't, as well as how you could have made the emotional message more clear.

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## WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

### A Question of Ethics

After finishing their grueling mixed-doubles volleyball game, Bengt and Lisa joined their competitors, Brad and Eleni, for burgers at the local bar and grill. Brad and Eleni, who had been dating for about a year, had won the games thanks to Eleni's killer spikes.

After some general conversation about the game, Bengt said, "Eleni, your spikes tonight were awesome!"

"Yeah, I was really impressed. You rocked!" Lisa added.

"Thanks, guys," Eleni said in a tone of gratitude, "I've really been working on them."

"Careful guys. We don't want too many compliments to go to Eleni's head," Brad said jokingly. Then after a pause, he said, "Oh, Eleni, would you get my sweater? I left it on that chair by the other table."

"You're kidding, right Brad? The chair is right next to you," Eleni replied.

Brad said nothing as he focused his gaze directly at Eleni.

Eleni quickly said, "OK, Brad. It's cool," and got the sweater for him.

"Isn't she sweet?" Brad said as Eleni gave him the sweater.

Lisa smiled, glanced at Bengt, and said, "Well, I'm out of here. I've got a lot to do this evening."

"Me too," Bengt said as he quickly stood up to join Lisa.

"See you next week," they said in unison as they hurried out the door, leaving Brad and Eleni alone at the table.

**What do you think Brad's nonverbal messages were attempting to communicate?**

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your speech, you might interpret the nonverbal message as boredom or disrespect. What it might be communicating, however, is utter exhaustion because your classmate just finished back-to-back 12-hour shifts at work while trying to keep up with homework for a full load of courses.

3. **Pay attention to the multiple nonverbal messages being sent and their relationship to the verbal message.** In any one interaction, you are likely to get simultaneous messages from a person's appearance, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, voice, as well as use of space and touch. By taking all nonverbal messages into consideration in conjunction with the verbal message, you are more likely to interpret their messages accurately.
4. **Use perception checking.** Perception checking lets you see if your interpretation of another person's message is accurate. By describing the nonverbal message you notice, sharing two possible interpretations of it, and asking for clarification, you can get confirmation or correction of your interpretation.

## Reflection and Assessment

Nonverbal communication consists of all the messages that transcend spoken or written words. Nonverbal messages may emphasize, substitute for, or contradict

a verbal message. They can regulate our conversations and project an image about who we are to others. It is also the primary way we convey our emotions. To assess how well you've learned what we addressed in these pages, answer the following questions. If you have trouble answering any of them, go back and review that material. Once you can answer each question accurately, you are ready to move ahead to read the next chapter.

1. What are the key characteristics of nonverbal communication and why is it critical to effective communication?
2. What are some examples of the different types of nonverbal messages we use to communicate?
3. What are some specific strategies you can employ to improve your nonverbal communication as both a sender and receiver of these messages?