Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication

Verbal Communication and Symbols
When we think of communication – the big, broad concept of communication – most of the time we are thinking about the verbal aspect of communication or what comes out of our mouth when we speak! Each time we say a word we are using symbols. Words are made up of letters which we know are symbols. When we combine the letters together we get a word and that word is also a symbol in that it represents a certain meaning for us. As we interpret the word we ascribe meaning to the word – we hear the word “teacher” and we interpret that to mean “a person who instructs” or we hear the word “school” and we interpret it to mean “a place to learn.”

Each letter or combination of letters is completely arbitrary – they are not connected to what they represent. You are using a computer to access this file. You know what “computer” means when you hear the term. Let’s pretend that you and your spouse refer to the computer as “The Big C” in front of the kids so they don’t know what you are talking about. You could just as easily call the computer “Fred” or “?@!#<” as long as you and your spouse both understood you were referring to the computer.

Symbols are completely arbitrary until meaning is ascribed to a combination of letters by people.

Symbols are ambiguous which means their meanings aren’t clear cut or fixed. This is why language is so easily misunderstood between people. The word gay is an excellent example. Does gay mean happy or homosexual or both? It depends on who is saying the word, who is hearing the word, and what the context of the conversation is about.

Symbols are abstract which means they are not concrete or tangible. Symbols stand for something but they are not the actual object itself. For example, some holidays have certain symbols attached to them. Valentine’s Day is represented by a heart but the heart is just a shape. The abstract principle we associate with the heart is love which is a feeling that comes from inside us toward another person. Love isn’t tangible – you can’t touch “love.” It is only something you can feel! But, when we see a heart or hear the word love, we know what instantly what it means.

We use symbols define experiences, people, relationships, feelings, and thoughts. We may say something is hot which means that the temperature of the item might burn you if you touch it. We can use the same term “hot” to describe a person but the definition of a “hot” person is one who is sexy! Same word yet two completely different definitions! Totalizing is when we use a single label to represent an entire person. If we see a person and label them “Hot” we are really limiting that person. We don’t see that the sexy person might also be smart, intelligent, a lover of the outdoors, an avid hunter and any number of other more important defining characteristics!

We use symbols to evaluate all the time. Symbols are value laden. Every time we label something or somebody, we are engaging in a value judgment about the item or person. Think about how many time we say something is “bad” or “good” – that is using a symbol as a value judgment to evaluate the item! Loaded language is using words to deliberately slant the interpretation of the communication. For instance, by saying “bleeding heart liberal” I am loading the term “liberal” so that you will interpret it as
a person who supports any social justice cause. Likewise, “Christian Right Wing” is loading the term “Christian” to mean a Christian that is conservative and Republican.

Because of the amount of loaded language that is in our normal dialogue, we also used politically correct phrasing — or we make our language “p.c.” To make language politically correct means that we try to be as neutral as possible in our conversation. So instead of using loaded language like “queerer than a two dollar bill” or “flaming queen” to reference someone who likes people of the same gender, we just say “gay” or “lesbian” to be politically correct. By being P.C. we are avoiding the harmful effects of loaded language – the hurtful effects of language!

Communication and Rules
Verbal communication is guided by all sorts of rules. When we were small children learning to interact with our parents we were taught communication rules such as not to interrupt when others are speaking and to listen to our elders. As we grow up, we learn that certain types of communication are appropriate in certain situations. We learn what we can say to whom, who we should/shouldn’t talk to and what we should talk to them about.

Regulative rules specify when, how, where, and with whom to talk about certain things. In my family it was never considered appropriate to say the “F” word – the word was taboo – but when I went to college that four-letter expletive was as common as “crap” was in my family! For the first few months, the “F” word seemed harsh to my ears but as I grew used to hearing it, I even used it a few times. Today, I may use the term to express frustration in private but I wouldn’t dream of using it in a professional setting. I have a colleague who got fired for telling our boss to “F-off.” It is important to learn what is appropriate to say in public and what to say in private.

Constitutive rules define what communication means by telling us how to count certain kinds of communication. We know that applause is wonderful to hear if you are on stage if you have been entertaining an audience but applause accompanied by fingers pointing at you may not feel good if you have just fallen on a patch of ice. For some people, a loving gesture might be a kiss but for someone else it might mean holding hands. Every time we interact with someone new we have to figure out the constitutive rules as we communicate with them.

Punctuation is the mental mark of the beginnings and endings of particular interactions. For instance, if we attend a wedding service we know that when the wedding march begins, the bridal party will enter and we should be quiet during the service. When we see the kiss, we know that the service is over. Every time we answer the phone – we say “Hello?” to signal to the other person to start the conversation and we say “Goodbye” to signal the end of the conversation – we are engaging in the punctuation rules of verbal conversation. Like any of the other communication rules, we learn punctuation rules as we grow up. We may always greet our parents with a hug/kiss in the morning and we may end the day the same way when we say “Good night.”

Guidelines for Improving Communication
1. Practice facework: Facework is controlling the face that you present to others. This means that you know the rules of communication for a variety of situations and you behave accordingly. You should
always err on the side of being conservative in any type of new social circle and especially in a work environment. Even if you are checking groceries at Walmart or working the drive through at McDonalds, you should be conscious of the face you are wearing for the public. Remember: People make judgments in the first 30 seconds they meet you about your entire character so always put your best face forward!

2. **Engage in dual perspective**: Dual perspective is recognizing another person’s point of view and acknowledging it as you communicate with them. You should always take the other person’s point of view into account in your communication which means you are conscious of the person’s background, age, gender, and ethnicity in the communication. If it is someone new you are interacting with, again, err on the side of conservatism in your communication until you know the person better. A great tactic to use when you argue with someone is to repeat the other’s perspective back to them. By outwardly saying it, you are acknowledging the other’s viewpoint and you make them feel valued – even if you don’t agree with what they are saying. If you and a friend are arguing about last night’s game, you might say “I understand that you think the forward on the Indian Hills basketball team is the best that we’ve ever had but I really think the guy who made the most points is the better player.” This is a basic communication lesson that is commonly shown on talk shows like Oprah and Dr. Phil – and it works because you are acknowledging the others viewpoint which means that the other person can’t claim you weren’t listening to them!

3. **Own your feelings and thoughts**: Nobody can make you feel anything or do anything. You are the only one who can feel or do anything in your life! But, when we communicate with others it is very common for us to place the blame for our feelings and our actions on the others in our life. Too often we say “you made me mad” when we should really say “I am mad.” By owning our feelings and thoughts we are not placing blame on another. Using I-language is empowering and much harder to argue with than if we play the blame game and use “you” language.

4. **Respect what others say about their feelings and ideas**: We need to let others speak for themselves. A common communication problem is when we talk for others. As a college instructor I get all sorts of calls from parents who are trying to solve their children’s problems – a financial aid issue or even registering for a class. The worst is a discussion about their child’s grade. They always get upset when I can’t talk and won’t talk to them about it – as instructors, we can’t because most college students are legal adults and there are privacy laws in place to protect student’s rights. We call these parents “helicopter parents” because they seem to be hovering over their children when the child isn’t legally a child anymore and should be solving his or her own problems. It is very important for people to learn to solve their own issues and to stand up for their own opinions but they can’t do that if others are always speaking for them. Now, there are times when it is necessary for a person to have an advocate who can be a voice for someone else – if it’s medically necessary due to physical impairment or mental disorder is one example of when it might be necessary to speak for someone else. This is why we have living wills so the voice of the patient is “heard.”

We also need to be aware that we may not truly know how another feels. Mind reading is a dangerous presumption that we should avoid. It is much more productive to listen openly rather than assume you
know the truth! Listening and letting others have a voice is about respecting the other person and valuing their feelings, thoughts, and opinions.

5. **Strive for accuracy and clarity**: Try to use **concrete, specific language** when you communicate as this will reduce down the ambiguity and abstractness of language. I was dating a guy in high school who said to me “I think we should see more of each other.” What does that mean? Does that mean he wanted to go out on more dates, move in together, attend the same college, or see me naked? The language isn’t really clear! What he meant was that we should be “exclusive” and “date nobody else” – in fact he was getting ready to give me a promise ring at the time. Needless to say, I wasn’t anywhere near as committed to the relationship as he was which made me say, “I think we should see less of each other” and that pretty much ended that relationship for the time being. Many years later we reconnected and are great friends today – in fact, we can now joke about what “I think we should see more of each other” means as it refers to an event in our past!

We also need to qualify our language which means that we should avoid over generalizing our language. One way we over generalize is when we use **static evaluations** to refer to people, places or events. Static evaluations drive me crazy because they are statements that suggest that something is frozen in time – that it never changes. It is a common complaint in our community that there is “never anything to do.” I know this isn’t true because there is always an event at Indian Hills Community College going on – we are booked solid for the entire year with lots of free public events for people to attend. Kids are frequent users of static evaluations too. My children love to say “Our house is boring – there is NOTHING to do.” Yeah, right! Of course they don’t like to be reminded of the books we have to read, the video games they can play, the bikes they can ride or the cleaning/laundry they could help with. They don’t like it when I respond that I am never bored – there is always something to do! Instead of practicing static evaluations when we speak, we should strive for using **indexing** because this is more accurate communication. Indexing is when you tie a description to the evaluation or statement. Instead of saying there is “never anything to do,” say “There isn’t anything I am interested in participating in this evening.”

**Nonverbal Communication**

**Nonverbal Communication Definition**

Let’s start with a definition of nonverbal communication so we are all coming at this from the same basis:

Nonverbal communication includes all other aspects of communication other than the words themselves. Nonverbal communication helps us to establish our identity and negotiate relationships.

**Common Examples of Nonverbal Communication**

1. **Gestures**: Movements of our hands, arms, and head tell a lot about how we feel about an issue, what we are passionate or sad about, and even when we are angry. If we are excited, our gestures may increase in frequency and speed. If we are sad, our gestures might stop altogether.
2. **Body Language**: This is how our body reflects our internal emotions or thoughts. If we are sad, we might close in and sit with our arms crossed, head down. But if we are confident, we will probably stand upright with our shoulders back and we will look others in the eye as we communicate.

3. **How we utter words tells a lot about what is going on inside of us.** If we stutter and stumble through our speech patterns, it might indicate we are nervous or perhaps uncomfortable discussing a certain issue. Or, it might indicate we are not telling the truth in our discussion and are lying or fabricating a story.

4. **Features of our environment**: The way we decorate our environment tells a lot about the things we value, the things we are interested in, and shares our style with the outside world.

5. **Objects that affect our personal image & interaction patterns**: These are things we own or decorate ourselves with (this includes body modifications like tattooing/piercing(s)), they tell others what is important to us, they reveal what group(s) we belong to, and even our personal philosophy on modesty and sexuality.

**5 Principles of Nonverbal Communication**

1. **There are similarities and differences between verbal and nonverbal communication.**

   Similarities between verbal and nonverbal communication include:

   - Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is symbolic. This means that it is ambiguous, arbitrary, and abstract just like verbal communication is. A handshake may be bone crushing to one person but to another it may seem wimpy. And, what do the people shaking hands mean by that handshake? It's all arbitrary. Is the handshake a greeting between coworkers or is it an agreement to something (i.e. “let’s shake on it”)? It is really an ambiguous, abstract motion.

   - Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is governed by rules. The rules are mutually agreed upon between people and develop over time. We know that kissing indicates an intimate relationship and that kissing using your tongue means a really intimate relationship usually involving something stronger than friendship maybe even a sexual relationship.

   - Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication may be intentional or unintentional. Sometimes our facial expression may give another the “right idea” or the “wrong idea” depending on how our facial expression is interpreted. Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is subjective in its interpretation.

   - Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is culture-bound and reflects the values & norms of a culture.
Differences between verbal and nonverbal communication include:

- Nonverbal communication is perceived as more believable than verbal communication. Many believe that what comes out of our mouth might be a lie but our body will never lie – body language is the true communication. If you are ever pulled over for a OWI (operating while intoxicated) or DUI (driving under the influence) and are asked to take a sobriety test – the one where you get out of the car and the cop asks you the questions and you “walk the yellow line” and/or touch the end of your nose and/or stand on one foot – one of the things that policeman is going to watch you for is body language. He is going to be watching to see where you look, your coordination, and your responsiveness to his test questions. FYI: A drunk person will tend to look at their feet or the line right in front of their feet but a sober person will tend to look much further out. And, no, I have never been through this test! I don’t have personal experience with this but I do have a close friend who is a police chief so we’ve chatted about this concept before.

- Nonverbal communication is multi-channeled while verbal communication is single channeled. Verbal communication comes out of our mouths (if we are deaf, it comes out of our hands through sign language!) but nonverbal comes out of our entire body – hands, facial expressions, body stance, feet placement, etc.

- Verbal communication is discrete while nonverbal communication is continuous. Discrete meaning that verbal communication happens in a given time frame – continuous meaning that nonverbal goes on and on, 24/7, not stopping.

2. **Nonverbal communication can supplement or replace verbal communication.**
   My children know when I give them “the look” that they better straighten up and behave. Sometimes, “the look” is more effective than anything that would ever come out of my mouth.

3. **Nonverbal communication can regulate interaction.**
   If I am chatting with a friend that is rattling along in his communication to the point I get confused, I might put one finger up to stop him so he will clarify what he means or he might even stop his rattling banter so I can comment.

4. **Nonverbal communication can establish relational level meanings including responsiveness, liking, and power or control.**
   When we look others in the eye, we establish a relationship with them – we invite the person to converse with us if we use friendly eyes but we discourage the person by not making eye contact. We use smiles, hugs, and some cultures use kisses as greetings to show that you like someone. We may give someone the “cold shoulder” by deliberately using body language to ignore the person. We exercise power and control through a variety of techniques: we may stand over a person to show our power in the situation or we may encourage the other so sit down to even out the power in a situation.
5. **Nonverbal communication reflects cultural values.**

When we see the American flag on someone's hat or t-shirt, we know that that symbol represents the cultural value of freedom in the United States. The symbol represents the Constitution, the style of government, the world power our nation has, and everything that American's stand behind as a collective culture. When that symbol is burnt, torn or destroyed, many American's become upset because the destruction of this powerful symbol represents the destruction of our core values: freedom of speech, government by the people/for the people, freedom of religion, etc.

**Types of Nonverbal Communication**

1. **Kinesics**: This includes body posture and the motions the body engages in. Kinesics is a fancy word for “body language.” We all know that body language is very revealing. In fact, research in communication shows that 90% of our communication is actually told through body language – not through the words we use! An important concept with body language is the phrase “We cannot not communicate.” I know the double negative in that phrase sounds funny but the statement is valid. What it means is that we are always communicating – 24/7 we are always communicating even when we are not vocally speaking because so much of our communication is nonverbal. Therefore, “we cannot not communicate!”

2. **Haptics**: This means “physical touch” – how we like to be touched, what is an acceptable level or amount of touching, and what is culturally normal or acceptable touching. Some families are touchy-feely families (mine is this way!) where everyone is showing open physical affection. Others are much more closed with less physical contact between members (my husband’s family is more this type – it took me years to get my father in law used to me hugging him!). These backgrounds tend to transfer themselves into our future comfort zones. For instance, if I come from a “huggy” family, I will probably be comfortable with large amounts of physical touch – perhaps from people I haven’t even known for a long period of time. This can also be a cultural reflection as some cultures are much more openly physical than others.

3. **Physical Appearance**: This involves everything from the way we dress to the personal grooming habits we engage in. This one is pretty obvious! Just think about the last person you were romantically interested in – the one who “turned you on” when you looked at him or her. What was it about them that caused you to turn your head for another look?

4. **Artifacts**: These are the personal objects we display, value, or hold on to because they have meaning for us. My grandmother used to say, we can tell a lot about a person by the junk that they keep! And, my Dad always says “One man’s junk is another man’s treasure!” To remember this word, think about an archaeologist on a dig in an ancient civilization. She finds an “artifact” from that civilization and attempts to assign meaning to it.

5. **Proxemics**: This is the study of space and how we use the space around us. Some of us like to fill up the space while others like a sparse existence. Some people are “pack-rats” who fill up our interiors while others are “neat freaks” with everything in its place in their space. To remember this word, think of “proximity.”
6. **Chronemics**: This is the use of time. How we use time, our punctuality in arriving or departing, and what our routines are says a lot about who we are. Some of us live by the clock – regimented and controlled by it. Others of us are more free spirits – we come and go on our whims. To remember this word, think of “chronology.”

7. **Paralanguage**: This is our vocal language but without actual words being used. It includes the utterances of our speech. For example, if I am listening to a shocking story that my friend is sharing with me, I might encourage her to continue by saying “oh!” or “ah!” if I am enlightened by what she says. Likewise, if I get hurt, I might cry out in alarm. These are not real words but are what we consider normal in our communication. To remember this word, break it down – *para* = “goes along with.” Therefore, paralanguage means something that goes along with language.

8. **Silence**: How we use silence or don’t use silence says a lot about our emotions. We can use silence as a weapon if we are angry or disappointed in them, i.e. giving someone the “silent treatment.” Or we might just be a quiet person by nature who enjoys “peace and quiet.” Sometimes people are perceived as shy because they tend to be quieter than others.