

**A COMMUNICATIVE VIEW OF THE RIGHTFUL PLACE OF  
NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN NATIVE- AND FOREIGN-  
LANGUAGE TEACHING**

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*Nonverbal communication, an essential component of all languages, has been, for a number of historical reasons, almost completely neglected in the teaching of both native and foreign languages. Speech has often been added to reading and writing as proper goals of language teaching, but the need for knowing nonverbal communication if one is speaking face-to-face with another is only slowly being realized. What is needed are two-language, detailed, descriptive contrasts of the nonverbal communication of the native and the target dialects or languages. No such contrast is currently more needed than one contrasting the nonverbal-communication systems of Standard Spanish and Standard American English.*

*Key words: communication, nonverbal, standard, artifact.*

**1. Introduction**

My purpose in this paper is to persuade teachers of language, whether native languages or foreign languages, to teach a truly balanced account of the dialects or languages they teach. This means, in effect, to teach on a communication model. This will typically require much more attention to the nonverbal component of the language they teach, probably more

attention to the speech component of that language, and necessarily less attention to the traditional concentration on the writing system of the language, if it has one.

This purpose is derived from the currently growing perception that a communicatively adequate definition of language must include a nonverbal component because, in face-to-face conversation, nonverbal communication may convey up to ninety percent of the message (Tannen 1998: Part 3). Such an adequate definition, still controversial but accepted here as the currently best definition might be: A language is a primary signaling system, a complex and inseparable combination of gesture and sound, that is, nonverbal communication and speech. Notice that in this definition there is no mention of the writing system as a component of language proper. The writing system of a language, if the language has a writing system, should be defined as a picture of the sound component of the language. Writing is, in fact, not a part of the language proper, which is only a combination of gesture and sound. The writing system is, of course, a necessary part of instruction in a language, if the language has an accompanying writing system, though only about 500 of the some 5000 known languages in the world have writing systems (Crystal 1990: 681), and only about 900 million people out of a population of about six billion on earth are literate (Crystal 1990: 710).

Adjustment to this communicative rather than the traditional, literary view of languages and its implications for truly balanced teaching of language is the major adjustment this paper asks language teachers to make. This is a considerable adjustment to ask of teachers whose education has, for the overwhelmingly large part, been based on the written systems of the languages they teach. It is, however, an adjustment that I believe will greatly improve both the attractiveness to their students of the languages they teach and the quality of the learning their students attain.

Understanding the teaching implications of this communicative model of language begins with two admissions. The first is that we do not teach the whole language but only its standard dialect (Blake 1996: 1-2). The second is that there is a clear separation of the dialect proper from the

dialect's writing system and a clear separation of the dialect proper into its nonverbal component, gesture, and its verbal component, speech. The three main communicative systems of a dialect that has a writing system are, then: its nonverbal system, its speech system, and its writing system. The nonverbal system, shared as it is with lower animals, might be characterized as subhuman. The speech system, defining us as it does, might be characterized as centrally human. The writing system, relatively rare among languages, as literacy is rare among humans, and not naturally acquired, might well be characterized as superhuman. Any balanced account of a dialect, whether a written description of the dialect or a curriculum for teaching the dialect, should provide a balanced treatment of these three main systems, each of which has, of course, both a sending and a receiving aspect.

## **2. Nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal communication, which typically precedes or accompanies verbal communication, that is, speech, is conventionally divided into the subcategories of environmental language, artifact language, and body language, from which we derive very important, often determining, information (Miller 1998: 96-103). Environmental language, over which we usually have minimal control, includes such things as place. Where on earth is the communication occurring, in what country, in a rural or urban setting, in what moral or religious context, in what landscape, in what language, indoors or outdoors, in what weather, in what zoning, in what workplaces, in houses or apartments, in public transit or private car, and the like? All of these we tend to take for granted, but they largely control the meanings of speech. Nonverbal communication also includes, of course, time. When is the communication occurring, in what season, at what time of day, at what tempo, between actors of what ages? Who are the actors, children, adults, authorities, subjects, in crowds or couples.

Artifact language is roughly defined as all the additions we make to ourselves from outside, such as relative nudity, cosmetics, perfumes, tattoos, piercings, coiffures, dress, accessories, eating, drinking, tobacco, cell phones, even cars. Over these aspects of nonverbal communication, we have

much more individual choice and control, so they become much more individually expressive, whether we are choosing them to express ourselves or reading them in others as their expressions of themselves.

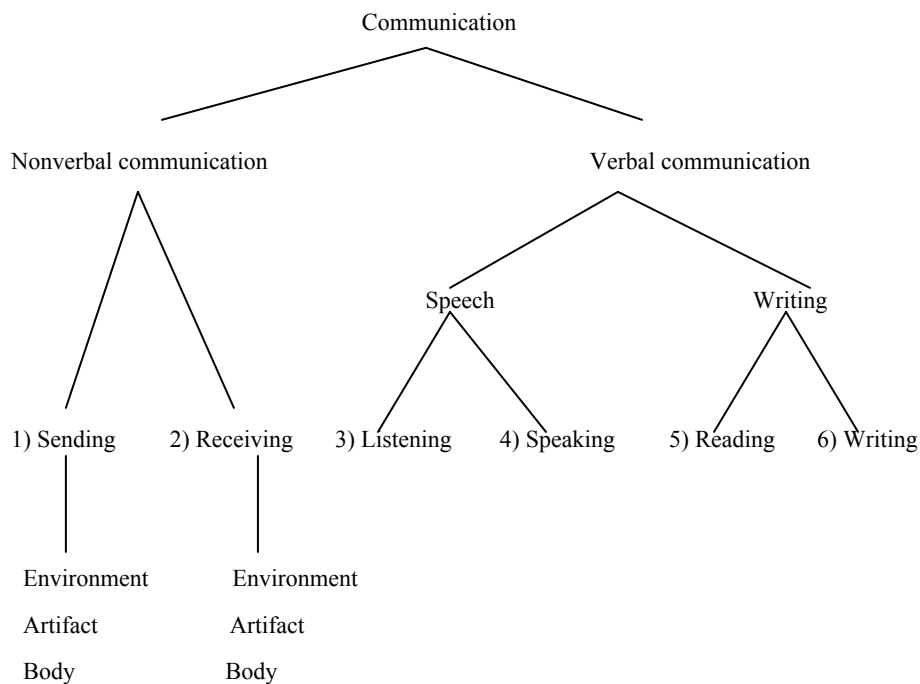
Body language, the core of gesture, includes our touching of self and others, territories we respect and defend, orientations and orders, our looking, our gestures of face, hand, head, arms, and legs, our postures, our appearances, our sounds and silences, and, of course, all these gestures when made by other people. Finally, there is the very important paralanguage, the intonation and tone of voice, that accompanies our speech and is capable of modifying, even reversing, our meanings.

We are aware but hardly conscious of most of the environmental language surrounding us over which we have minimal control and therefore tend to take for granted. We are much more acutely conscious of artifact and body languages, both in sending them and in reading them in others. We are, however, typically more acute readers of others than we are acutely aware of the artifact and body language we are sending because the senses are largely oriented outward.

All of this nonverbal communication typically precedes and surrounds and influences the meanings of speech, if speech occurs. In fact, the overwhelming majority of our communication is limited to these nonverbal aspects of communication, especially in modern urban life, where we are surrounded by an environment and by people with whom we communicate only nonverbally. We dress and behave with the expectation of our nonverbal behavior being read by others, and we are very acute readers of others' nonverbal behavior. However, we interact in speech with very few others and even more rarely use speech beyond its simplest phatic uses. Our interactions with the overwhelming majority of people we encounter are limited to nonverbal interaction and the probabilities, but not certainties, of our readings of their artifact and body languages in the environments in which we encounter them.

### 3. Verbal communication

Verbal communication, of which we are typically much more conscious, is, in its turn, overwhelmingly speech, though surprisingly little of that. Speech is that second central component of the dialect proper, but, of course, *verbal* means ‘using words’ and includes the writing system of a dialect, if it has one, and the writing system includes both a receiving and a sending aspect, that is, reading and writing. Our communicative model by now looks something like this:



With the verbal skills of language, especially its writing system, if it has one, we are much more familiar by bias of our educations, but effectively there are four main skills of language: sending nonverbal signals, receiving nonverbal signals, listening, and speaking, and two main skills of writing: reading and writing. Three of these six skills are receptive or

receiving skills and relatively strong: reading nonverbal communication, listening, and reading texts. The other three of these six skills are productive or sending skills and relatively weak: sending nonverbal communication, speaking, and writing. My hope in this paper is to persuade language teachers to concern themselves, in a balanced manner, with all three of the dialect systems: nonverbal communication, speech, and writing. That means to be concerned with all six of these skills and to emphasize them in their true order of practical, communicative importance, which I hope to show in what follows.

#### **4. Order of acquisition**

What should first be noticed about the six main skills of a dialect is their order of acquisition by the race historically and by the individual in acquiring a native language. Historically and individually, we certainly send nonverbal signals earliest in life in signaling our presence by making our mothers ill or kicking them from inside. Once outside, we continue sending nonverbal communication, often loudly, and continue to send it for as long as we live and communicate by it as long as any human notice is taken of us. We apparently begin listening even before emerging from the womb and continue listening until death or loss of hearing. We do not begin to speak typically until about eighteen months after birth. We continue sending and receiving nonverbal communication, listening, and speaking for about five years typically before we begin to learn to read and write, if our dialect has a writing system and we are lucky enough to learn it. Otherwise, we use only the four natural language skills, the primary language skills, sending and receiving nonverbal communication, listening, and speaking, throughout life. The great majority of humanity today never learns to read or write (Crystal 1990: 710), and those who do learn, unfortunately, often make little or no use of either skill.

## **5. Relative importance of language skills**

What, then, is the relative importance of our three, two-sided language systems, nonverbal communication, speech, and writing? If we consider the historical or philosophical importance of these main systems, the order of importance of the systems would have to be: writing, speech, and nonverbal communication. The best thoughts of the best minds in their best moments are accessible to us almost exclusively in writing, versus all the chattering and gesticulating with which we get through the day. If, on the other hand, we consider the frequency or the practical and applied, communicative order of importance of these main language systems, we see a radically different order: nonverbal communication, speech, and writing. In support of this order, it should first be noticed that, because we have bodies, we send nonverbal signals twenty-four hours a day and communicate nonverbally whenever we are observed, from the first to the last human notice that is taken of us, from, for instance, “You can feel him kick” to “Chaucer lies buried in Westminster Abbey.”

Speech, a distant second in frequency among these three systems, is, in fact, relatively infrequent except among mouth people such as teachers, guides, announcers, talking heads, and barkers. Estimates of average daily speech, which is largely limited to conscious and voluntary effort, vary from lows of just a few minutes to highs of several hours, but leave no doubt that humans speak radically less frequently than they send out nonverbal signals, which are mostly involuntary and incessant. And, of course, some doubt that anyone listens at all!

As for reading and writing, the huge majority of humanity is illiterate and reads and writes nothing, and probably the majority of the literate sixth of humanity reads nothing more demanding than street signs and soup cans during a typical day and writes literally nothing (Crystal 1990: 710). Recently, even 10 to 20% of Americans have been described as functionally illiterate (Crystal 1990: 710). Even reading cultures, such as Spain, report that reading and writing are in decline in competition with television, films, and music. Writing, relatively rare as it is, carries the

culture historically and presently, but language proper, that is, nonverbal communication and speech, carries almost all of our day-to-day living.

In the practical world of human interaction and communication, nonverbal communication is king, speech is a weak and distant second, and writing is currently a progressively losing third. Nonverbal communication is the overwhelmingly dominant means of human communication. Practically all urban human communication is nonverbal. We apparently begin to stop knowing and talking to people when social groups exceed 150, a very small village.

## **6. The pervasiveness of nonverbal communication**

While reading and writing seem in decline and speech seems so little, nonverbal communication is pervasive. Because we have bodies, we are constantly sending out nonverbal signals from gestation to the last memory of us to survive, and those nonverbal signals communicate whenever we are observed. Though we are less aware of what nonverbal communication we send out than of what we receive, we are acute, deep, and detailed readers of others' nonverbal communication. Our readings of environmental language and others' artifact and body languages seem involuntary, instantaneous, and ruthless, though we are taught to control our expression of the judgments that we make of others' nonverbal and verbal communication.

And what do we notice? Whatever we can sense with any or all of our senses: sight, hearing, feeling, smell, and even taste, that is, kinesics, paralanguage, proxemics, olfaction, skin sensibility, tastes, artifacts, and environments. This communication, which is so pervasive and enveloping, not only accompanies and conditions speech but, probably more important, precedes speech and, in face-to-face conversation can often carry the bulk of the total communication. What we understand, what is communicated to us in real life, begins with our environment, the time, the place, the setting, the actors, the circumstances, the usual forms and modes, all of which precede speech and condition the meaning of speech when and if it occurs.



If speech does not occur, we typically continue to operate depending entirely on the probabilities conveyed by nonverbal communication. We may not utter or hear a word spoken on a complex trip across a modern city to work, dealing entirely nonverbally with the demands of the trip. If there is speech before arriving at the workplace, it is likely to be purely phatic, “Hello,” “Morning!” “How are you?” and the like.

As we deal with our environments and the huge majority of the people in them, we, in fact, rarely arrive at speech but read those environments and the people in them purely nonverbally and from up to about a quarter of a mile’s distance typically. We see by people’s height their probable age, by their width, something of their probable class. We guess, by their hair and clothes, their probable class and their probable sex, by overt sexual characteristics of breasts and shoulders compared to hips their more certain sexes, by their faces, virtually their biographies, their probable education and the range of their probable occupations. We do all this reading and probable classification involuntarily, instantaneously, and ruthlessly and more and more accurately as we grow older. Not only do actions speak louder than words; they tend to speak more honestly and to speak before words are spoken. Finally, it is simply a fact that everything speaks, even without words, and everyone is listening, though some, of course, have better ears than others.

## **7. Speech**

When people do arrive at speech, they typically intend to convey lexical and grammatical meanings, but by their choices of lexicon and grammar, they also inevitably and often unwillingly project their probable educational and socioeconomic status for better or worse. The intent of the bulk of native-language instruction in the schools is aimed at exposing students to the standard dialect of their native language and encouraging them to use it in the pursuit of upward social mobility. Foreign-language instruction similarly typically pursues conquest of the standard dialect of the foreign language.

Just a glance at the history of education shows rather clearly why speech has traditionally been rather neglected in language instruction, in both the native and foreign languages and why nonverbal communication has been, until very recently, almost totally absent. The basic problem is that life is short, and school, as preparation for life, is even shorter. With what little time there was and is for school, the concentration was and still is, or ought to be, on the most liberating superhuman codes: reading, writing, and arithmetic, the “Three R’s.” These codes, unlike nonverbal communication and speech, are not acquired naturally simply by growing up in a human community, but must be laboriously taught and learned.

Concentration on the Three R’s still so neglects speech that surveys indicate that people’s greatest fears are not of atomic war or cancer but simply of speaking in public. This neglect leaves people, at the ends of their educations, relatively inarticulate and subject to stage fright, and television seems to be making this even worse. Nonverbal communication, beyond maintenance of minimal order in the classroom, rarely exceeds a slight concern for deportment. The limitation of traditional schooling to the Three R’s, as a general model, was carried over into foreign-language teaching. Its instruction, like instruction in the native language, was limited to reading and writing, and the native language was taught by grammar. Foreign language was taught by grammar and translation. Of course, when we teach language, either as native language or foreign language, we do not teach the whole language. What we teach is, to the best of our abilities, the prestige dialect of the language, the dialect that meets the usual requirements of a standard language; that is, it must be national, current, and reputable.

The relative lack of concern for speech and the total disregard of nonverbal communication in foreign-language teaching made very good sense in the Nineteenth Century and may still make good sense in many places in the world today. It presumed that all use of the foreign language would be limited to the writing system, whether for reading literature in the foreign language or corresponding by traditional mail, snail-mail. It was, for instance, only during the First World War, when American commerce shifted from Europe to South America, that the need arose for large numbers

of people able to speak Spanish (Pei 1959: 1). World War II imposed a similar sudden need for large numbers of people able to speak a considerable number of foreign languages. After World War II, speech was widely added to the foreign-language curriculum, adding listening and speaking skills to the traditional reading and writing skills. What seems, however, to have been only slowly realized, if it has been realized, is that once people speak face-to-face, nonverbal communication comes into play and often plays a vitally important part in communication.

Today, throughout the world, the traditional grammar-and-translation method, aimed at reading and writing skills, is still probably the dominant method of foreign-language teaching. Where speech has been added to the curriculum, listening and speaking have become additional goals, but to this day, few curricula admit the necessity of adding nonverbal communication to speech instruction, and materials for offering it are few and far between. Grammar-and-translation methods, aimed only at reading and writing, still probably dominate foreign-language instruction even in the most advanced countries. Even where listening and speaking have been added to curricula as sought-after skills, nonverbal communication differences between the native language and the target language are still almost totally neglected except in the diplomatic foreign-language schools of the most advanced countries. These specially advanced schools have long since come to the realization that speech control without nonverbal-communication control can lead to misunderstandings of serious and unaffordable proportions.

### **8. Technological advances**

Advances in technology have helped a great deal in foreign-language learning of listening and speaking. Records quickly gave way to tapes, and gramophones to language laboratories, which in turn are giving way to the Walkman and language-tape libraries. Video tapes give similar promise for the teaching of both speech and nonverbal communication, and video-tape libraries are being assembled, though the video tapes must still be played on nonportable machines. Portable CD players for music are already common,

and portable players for CD videos and movies cannot be far behind. These machines' great advantages for foreign-language instruction are their infinite patience in modeling and, when portable, their constant accessibility. They do not, however, pose particular threats to language teachers, who will always be necessary in education in order to model the value of the subject and organize the courses and to some degree motivate students in their studies.

The normal classroom will no doubt remain the dominant and worst possible setting for learning a foreign language and should be radically rethought. Individualizing student instruction and perhaps abandoning the classroom except, perhaps, for necessary monitoring and testing, seem to make very real promises of better outcomes. Allowing students, with the aid of the new machines, to proceed at their own paces in pursuit of competency exams might improve both motivation and learning. With videos for learning the nonverbal communication that accompanies speech and with tapes for learning listening and speaking and with texts for learning reading and writing, students should be able to set their own paces and pursue the balanced control of the target language that I am advocating. The classroom might be better used as a listening site or video projecting theater, for trouble-shooting, practice, testing, or simple company in pursuit of the subject, than as it is typically used today.

### **9. What is needed for instruction in nonverbal communication?**

What, then, do we need for teaching the nonverbal communication of the standard dialects of either native or foreign languages? First, we need to admit that we are not purveying the whole language, native or foreign, but only its prestige or standard dialect, a dialect that is national, current, and reputable. As N.F. Blake (1996: 1-2 ) has recently pointed out, when we speak of English, we do not refer to all the dialects of the language but only to the standard dialect of the language. This prestige dialect is typically the native dialect of the educated class in the national capital. They are typically middle-class, often college-educated, professional people. This defining

group defines the nonverbal communication component of the dialect as well as its speech and writing norms.

How is the standard dialect of a language, whether as a native language or a foreign language, best taught? Of course, by authentic modeling and attempted imitation. The nonverbal-communication, speech, and writing skills of the standard dialect are best modeled by native or near-native users of the standard dialect or by similarly authentic sound tapes or sound, color, motion-picture films of standard-dialect nonverbal communication, speech, and writing behaviors. For the nonverbal-communication skills, videos and films best portray authentic behavior, and tapes best model authentic speech. Both may soon be joined by portable CD players able to play films and model both speech and the nonverbal communication that necessarily so often accompanies speech. Of course, virtually all printed books, magazines, newspapers, etc. continue, as ever, to model, more or less accurately, the state of the written standard.

#### **10. A reasonable, interim solution**

Walkmans and good tapes are even now beyond the means of most learners of either prestige native-language dialects or prestige foreign-language dialects, and videos and CD players even more beyond most learners' means. These cutting-edge technological helps are extremely expensive. A more reasonable interim choice is a detailed, written, book-length description contrasting the native standard-dialect nonverbal communication with native nonstandard-dialect nonverbal communication, for teaching the native language, or contrasting the nonverbal communication of the standard dialect of the native language with the nonverbal communication of the standard dialect of the target language. Such a text would cover all the aspects of nonverbal communication mentioned at the beginning of this paper and more. Ideally, such a book would be a dual-language text which would allow its readers, both teachers and students, to read in either their native language or their target language or in both as necessary. Among the most needed of all such two-language contrasts of nonverbal communication is one contrasting the nonverbal communication of Standard Spanish with

the nonverbal communication of Standard American English. Probably no such two-language contrast is more needed than that between Standard Spanish and Standard American English, the two leading contenders as global second or foreign languages and also the two most studied foreign languages among native speakers of Spanish and English.

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