

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

—George Bernard Shaw

The three basic elements of communication (verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal) are often abbreviated as 3 Vs—Verbal, Vocal, and Visual, respectively. Following is the detailed description of the individual element:

Verbal

The verbal element forms the principle content of the message, which is transmitted through spoken or written form. During communication, it is very important for the sender to take care of the understanding of the receiver. He should avoid using the words which may not be understood (or may even be misunderstood) by the receiver.

To understand the importance of language, readers are requested to reply the following question instantly:

“Have you taken your frukost today?”

If you could not give an instant reply, let us give it another chance:

“Have you taken your breakfast today?”

Frukost is a Swedish word, which means breakfast in English.

In this example, a single word (breakfast) from a well-known language (English) was replaced to a translated word in an unknown language (Swedish). This small change had converted a very simple question to a very difficult one.

The same problem is faced by the receivers when the sender uses a language which is unknown for them. For example, if a doctor uses multiple English words or medical terminologies, all of his patients may not be able to understand his question or instructions.

Sender can easily perceive the intellectual level and understanding of the receiver during initial few moments of the communication. Then, he should choose his words accordingly.

It is interesting to know that during doctor-patient communication, there are several occasions when the use of some unconventional words makes the communication even better. Some diseases, procedures, or objects are popularly known by some specific names by the native people. These words are more commonly used by rural and low socioeconomic class people. The list of such words is vast and varies from place to place. For example, at some places, tubectomy, hysterectomy, and radiotherapy are known as *chhota operation* (English meaning: small operation), *bada operation* (English meaning: big operation), and *sikaai* (English meaning: hot fomentation), respectively. Now, instead of using the words of standard language (such as Hindi, English, etc.), it will be better if the doctor uses these well-known words for communication with the suitable patients.

In short, same language may not be appropriate for communication with all types of patients. A doctor must learn to modify his language according to the understanding of his patients.

The importance of language should not be ignored even during writing some instructions on patient's prescription. The important instructions about medicines, diet, precautions, etc., should be clearly written in the language which is easily understood by the patient.

Apart from the selection of words, brevity and clarity are two important components of verbal communication. Sender should be able to convey the important message in minimum possible words (brevity), as it may become very difficult for the receiver to understand and retain long messages. Similarly, the spoken words should be pronounced clearly (clarity), otherwise the receiver may not be able to understand some part or whole of the message.

Apart for communication with patients, it is also important to take care of selection of words while communicating with your colleagues in front of the patients, e.g., during bedside conversation. As far as possible, some words with dual meaning (such as sex, drugs, etc.) should be avoided. Similarly, sometimes, it is better to converse with your colleagues in a language which is not understood by the patient. The well-known words should be replaced by the medical terms, such as hypertension for high BP, malignancy for cancer, etc. Otherwise sometimes, patient and his relatives may misinterpret the conversation.

During his routine round in the ward, a consultant started discussing about the disease of a patient near his bed. Patient was from low socioeconomic class and conversation was going on in English language. At the end of whole discussion, the consultant told his residents—“Luckily, he is not having any cancer, otherwise it would have been a highly serious condition”. Patient was having some benign and curable tumor, but he and his wife became very anxious after this bedside conversation because they both could understand only two words from the whole discussion: *cancer* and *serious*.

Paraverbal

The paraverbal communication is made by the sender through various elements, such as speed, tone, volume, pitch, pause, stress, etc. These are also known as the elements of *paralanguage*, as they are spoken out, but still they are not the true words. A systematic study of the effect of these elements in communication is known as *vocalics*.

Some of these elements are described below, especially in context of communication with patients:

- **Speed** - A typical speaker speaks about 100–125 words in a minute. It should be remembered by the doctor that while he is speaking, the patient is trying to understand his spoken words. Hence, he may miss some important message if the speed is too fast. Speed should be moderate, neither too fast, nor too slow.
- **Volume** - Just like the speed, the volume should also be moderate, neither too low, nor too loud. Words spoken with very low volume may not be clearly heard by the patients. At the same time, no patient would like his doctor to converse with him in loud voice, as he may not like the others to hear about his problem. Doctor should speak to his patient in moderate volume, which should be further reduced while talking about some personal matters, such as sexual history, addiction, etc.
- **Tone** - During communication with patients, tone of the doctor should be gentle and soft. While explaining or instructing the patient, his tone should be of adult-to-adult sharing type and not of parent-to-child type.
- **Pause** - It is very impressive to use pauses of adequate length at several places of the speech, as used by politicians, motivational speakers, etc. Pause is usually taken after some important point, as it gives the listener some moments to think over it.
- **Stress** - Just like pause, some extra emphasis on any part of message can be given by speaking it with some stress. For example, following is a simple instruction given by a doctor to his patient:

“You will not be able to eat anything for 4 hours after your surgery”.

The impact of this message can be increased by giving extra stress on some important words. It will be taken more seriously by the patient if the doctor puts some stress on words, such as *anything* and *4 hours*.

In short, a simple monotonous message can be made more meaningful and impactful by taking proper care of various paraverbal elements, such as tone, stress, pause, etc.

Nonverbal

As described earlier, this is the strongest and most impactful element during face-to-face conversation between two or more persons. This is popularly known as the “body language”, but both of them are quite different. Body language is mainly manifested by movement of some part or whole of the body (e.g., by gait, gesture, etc.) while nonverbal communication includes body language plus other elements, such as appearance, possessions, etc.

■ DESCRIPTION OF VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Unlike verbal element, nonverbal elements are mainly encoded and decoded subconsciously. Following is the description of some of these elements, especially in context of doctor-patient communication :

Personal Appearance

Some researchers state that it takes only a fraction of a second for our mind to get an idea about the character and personality of a person by his appearance. This impression, which is popularly known as the first impression, becomes more firm in next 3 seconds.

The appearance of a person is determined not only by his facial appearance. It includes several other elements, such as clothing, possessions, etc. A systematic study of the impact of clothing and other objects on personality and nonverbal communication of a person is known as *artifacts* or *objectics*.

All over the world, medical profession is considered to be a noble profession and so, the appearance and first impression of any doctor will play a major impact on the overall outcome of the doctor-patient communication. In several studies, it was found that the majority of patients prefer to see their doctor (male or female) in formal attire, instead of the casual attire. Similarly, the impact of various possessions,



Fig. 5.1: Decent appearance suits medical profession.

such as shoes, belt, jewelry, pen, etc., should not be ignored. Just like the dressing, these items should be decent and should match with the dignity of our profession (**Fig. 5.1**).

A child met an accidental head injury at his home. His parents took him urgently to a nearby hospital. A young doctor examined the child and advised for his hospitalization. Parents noticed that the doctor was wearing a faded and torn jeans, T-shirt, and sport shoes, with an apron on his shoulder. He was around 25-year-old, with a large tattoo on his right arm. Though he was quite competent and capable to manage such cases, still the parents preferred to take their child to some other hospital.

It is well said by someone that the first impression is the last impression. It provides a halo effect during further communication, i.e., a positive impression of someone gives you a positive feeling about his other characters also. In contrast, if the first impression is negative, it becomes very difficult to cover up this loss during subsequent communication.

Posture

It can be simply defined as the position in which the person keeps his body during sitting or standing. In our routine life, almost all of our communication occurs in any of these two positions. Following

are certain positive suggestions to improve your posture during communication:

- Keep your spine straight and chin slightly up. Avoid slouching, side tilting, or backward tilting (**Fig. 5.2**)
- While listening to someone in sitting position, bend slightly forward (Sprinter's position). This will give the person a feeling that you are interested in listening to him (**Fig. 5.3**).



Fig. 5.2: Backward leaning: Wrong posture.



Fig. 5.3: Sprinter's position: Right posture.

- Prefer to sit or stand in an open posture. Both arms should be free and open. Avoid closed postures, such as locking your arms in front of the chest or the groin region (fig leaf stance). Avoid locking your hands on your back region (stand-at-ease position) (**Figs. 5.4 to 5.6**).
- Do not keep your any of your hands in your pocket (**Fig. 5.7**).



Fig. 5.4: Open posture.



Fig. 5.5: Closed posture.



Fig. 5.6: Various types of wrong postures in standing position.



Fig. 5.7: Hands in pocket: Wrong posture.

- Do not keep your hands on your hip (arms akimbo position). This indicates an arrogant or aggressive attitude.
- Do not keep your hand on your chin and mouth, especially during speaking (Fig. 5.8).

Gesture

Gestures are the movements of some part (mainly hand and head) or whole of the body to express some idea or meaning. They are different from the sign language, which is used for communication with and



Fig. 5.8: Hand on mouth while speaking: Wrong position.

between deaf and dumb persons. A systematic study of the importance of gestures in communication is known as *kinesics*.

There are several ways to classify the commonly practiced gestures. One classification divides them in three groups:

Symbolic Gestures

These gestures are also known as emblems. These gestures are intentionally made by the person to convey some signal or message to another person. For example, waving the hand for *good bye*, showing the thumb for *good wishes*, crossed fingers for *good luck*, beckoning to *call* someone, up-down head nodding for *yes*, side-to-side head nodding for *no*, joining the palm of both hands for *namaste*, and many more.

These gestures can be made with/without speech. For example, while leaving someone, you can simply wave your hand or can say “bye-bye” along with the waving hand. In other words, they are made consciously or subconsciously, either to replace or to augment the effect of spoken words.

The meaning of some of these gestures may be different in different countries. For example, making a circle with your thumb and index finger is a sign of appreciation (OK) in many countries, but in Japan, it is considered as a sign for money and in Arabic countries, it is a

sign of threat. Hence, one should be cautious while practicing such gestures at some alien place.

Conversational Gestures

These are the random movements of one or both hands which are subconsciously performed by the person only when he speaks (**Figs. 5.4 and 5.9**). They are also known as illustrators. These gestures differ from the symbolic gestures on following points:

- Symbolic gestures are mostly performed consciously while conversational gestures are subconscious movements.
- Symbolic gestures can be made with/without speech while conversational gestures are made only while the person is speaking (hence, they are called as conversational gestures). These movements start and stop with the speech only.
- Various types of symbolic gestures carry some specific meaning, which is decoded and understood by the receiver. In contrast, conversational gestures are random movements without any specific meaning.

Sometimes, these movements are performed subconsciously even when the other person is not in front of you, e.g., during telephonic conversation.

Different people have got different tendencies to perform these gestures. The overall effect of these movements is determined by



Fig. 5.9: Conversation gestures.

their various characters, such as frequency, speed, range, etc., of the hand movements.

The greatest advantage of proper use of conversational gestures is that they make the person look more confident in communication. This can be felt by watching the speech of some famous politicians and news readers.

This is another advantage of keeping an open posture during communication, as your hands are free to perform these gestures during your speech. In one interesting study, participants were divided in three groups and were asked to speak in different conditions. In first group, both arms of participants were immobilized. In second group, only one arm was kept free while both arms were kept free in the third group. It was found that the restriction of movements of hands led to decrease of fluency of speech and increase in difficulty to find the proper words.

Adapters

These are not the true gestures. These are frequent purposeless movements made by some persons during communication. Some common examples are leg shaking, foot shaking, head scratching, nail biting, adjusting the spectacles, clicking the pen, etc. (**Fig. 5.10**). They can be made on their own body part (self-focused, such as repeatedly



Fig. 5.10: Adapter: Fidgeting with pen.

touching the nose or curling the hair) or on some surrounding object (object focused, such as playing with the paper weight on table).

Some people are habitual of performing some specific movements frequently or continuously and subconsciously. In fact, these movements can be considered as strong distracters in communication, as they make the person look nervous (e.g., leg shaking) or disinterested (e.g., pen clicking, playing with some object) during conversation.

Most of the gestures mentioned above are made by various movements of hands (manual gestures). There are several other gestures which are made by some other body part (nonmanual gestures). Head nodding is the most important example of the nonmanual gesture. As the conversational gestures are made while person is speaking, head nodding is performed subconsciously while the person is listening to someone. Proper head movement during listening gives a positive feedback to the speaker and encourages him to speak more.

Like the conversational gesture, one should also be careful about various features of head nodding, such as speed, range, frequency, etc. For example, it is better to perform slow and lengthy nods, as rapid and small movements may make the person feel that you are in hurry. Similarly, intermittent head movements are better, as they look more natural than the continuous up and down movement of head.

Facial Expressions

Human face can make thousands of expressions, either intentionally or subconsciously. These are made by various combinations of movements of some parts of face, such as eyes, eyelids, eyebrows, lips, nose, and cheeks. Some common examples of the feelings which can be conveyed through some specific type of facial expressions are happiness, sadness, surprise, anger, disgust, fear, confusion, etc.

During face-to-face communication, these expressions are mostly made subconsciously. Communication is always better if the person has some specific expressions while speaking or listening. The expressions made during speaking greatly augment the impact of spoken message. For example, it is always better to convey some good news with happy facial expressions and some bad news with some degree of sadness on your face. Similarly, a person will always get a positive feedback if he finds appropriate variation of expressions on face of his listener, such as smile, amused, surprised, etc. (**Fig. 5.11**). No one will be encouraged to speak to a person who is listening to him with a mask-like expressionless face. Expressions of listener make the



Fig. 5.11: Various types of facial expressions.

speaker feel that he is not just hearing the spoken words, but he is also understanding the conveyed message.

Eye Contact

It is the moment when two persons simultaneously look in each other's eyes during face-to-face conversation. It is also known as the mutual gaze. A systematic study of the role of this element in communication is known as *oculesics*.

During communication, it is important to be careful about various parameters of eye contact, such as duration, frequency and direction of eye movements, blink rate, etc. Proper eye contact makes the person look more confident during speaking (**Fig. 5.3**). Similarly, listening with a good eye contact makes you look attentive and interested in listening. In some studies, it is suggested that eye contact should be maintained for 70% of time during speaking and for 90% of time during listening. Total avoidance of eye contact makes you look under confident and disinterested in communication (**Fig. 5.12**). In contrast, continuous staring and infrequent blinking of the person can make the other one uncomfortable after sometime.

Like the other factors of nonverbal communication, the pattern of eye contact also varies from person to person. Some people avoid making eye contact during speaking or listening or both. This is known



Fig. 5.12: Eye aversion: Poor eye contact during communication.

as eye aversion. Moreover, the pattern of eye contact of some people depends on seniority and gender of the other person, i.e., they find it difficult to make proper eye contact with the persons of opposite gender.

It is important to be careful about where to look during the breaks of eye contact. Human eyes differ from the eyes of other animals in the fact that a larger part of sclera (white) of human eyes is visible. Because of this, a person can accurately judge that you are looking at which part of his face or body. Sometimes, this can act as distracter in proper communication. For example, a young girl will certainly become uncomfortable if, during conversation, you start looking at some acne on her cheek. Similarly, if you look at mobile, wrist watch, or wall clock frequently, the person may feel that you are in hurry and not interested in communicating with him.

It is better to be careful and attentive toward our eye contact while talking to a small group of persons (such as patient with his relatives). During speaking, try to make intermittent eye contact with almost everyone in the group, depending upon their relative importance in communication. Eye contact is a sign of engagement. If you make eye contact with only one person, after sometime, the others may start feeling neglected.

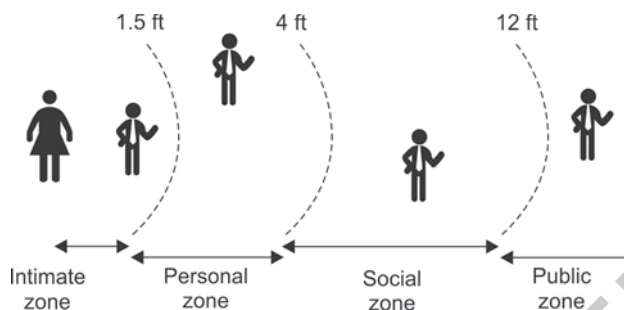


Fig. 5.13: Interpersonal distance zones.

Distance

The physical distance between two persons during communication is known as the interpersonal distance. It is important to keep this distance in mind during face-to-face conversation. A systematic study of role and impact of this distance during communication is known as *proxemics*.

In general, the distance of about 1.5 feet from a person is considered as the intimate distance and this zone around him is called as the intimate zone. The person will be comfortable only if some intimate person (such as spouse, parents, or any other family member) is standing in this zone (the range of this zone is shorter in some countries, where people prefer to stand very close to each other during conversation) (**Fig. 5.13**).

The area beyond this zone is known as personal zone, which extends from 1.5 to 4 feet. This zone is appropriate to stand or sit during face-to-face communication.

Hence, except for the time when physical contact is essential (e.g., during examination of a patient), one should always prefer to stay in personal zone and to not to encroach in the intimate zone of the person. At the same time, it is also wrong to stand far away from any person, as both may not be clearly audible to each other. Moreover, this may give the person a feeling of being neglected and ignored (e.g., a doctor talking to an admitted patient from the door of his room).

The intimate distance can be roughly imagined as equal to *one arm's length*. This precaution is even more important when someone is communicating with a person of opposite gender.



Fig. 5.14: Physical contact during communication.

Touching

There are several acts of physical contact between two persons during communication, such as hand shaking, hand on shoulder, pet on back, etc. Like the element of distance, the custom of these acts also varies in different countries. In some places, people prefer to make frequent physical contacts during communication while they are considered as unacceptable at some other place. The study of the role of physical contact during communication is known as *haptics*.

During communication, one should be careful about the impact of these acts. Apart from the culture of country, the age and gender of the persons play a very important role here. For example, while explaining about the prognosis of disease, it will be quite sympathetic and acceptable if young male doctor places his hand on the shoulder of an elderly male person, but the same act may not be acceptable if he does the same with a young female patient (**Fig. 5.14**).

How to Assess and Improve your Nonverbal Communication?

Following are some of the common and easy methods for a person to assess and improve his own nonverbal communication:

- *Self-awareness:* As described earlier, majority of our nonverbal communication is coded and decoded at subconscious level. Hence, a lot of self-assessment can be done by any person simply by focusing his mind on himself only. He can simply ask few questions to himself, such as *What do I do while talking to the others?, How do I stand?, Where do I keep my hand?, Do I make proper eye contact?, Do I nod my head while listening?*, and many more. This will help him in assessing his strength and weaknesses during communication.
- *Observation:* We meet and observe hundreds of people every day, in some or the other situation. A great amount of nonverbal communication can be learnt by watching the body language of people around us. Similarly, same practice can be done by observing the various elements of body language (such as gestures, expressions, etc.) of different people in movies, serials, interviews, news debates, etc. Volume of video should be turned off, as it will help you in concentrating only on the nonverbal communication of various characters.
- *Talking in front of a mirror:* By talking to himself in front of a mirror, a person can assess several elements of his body language like posture, gestures, and facial expressions. This method has been commonly practiced by various theater and movie artists, politicians, public speakers, etc. Unfortunately, this method is not useful for assessing the eye contact of the person as he will have to fix his gaze on his mirror image only.
- *Video recording:* This is probably the best and complete method of analysis of your body language. By watching the recorded video of your conversation with your friend, you can assess all three elements (verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal) of communication. Moreover, this recording can also be preserved for comparison in future.