Kinesics and Context

Essays on Body Motion Communication

RAY L. BIRDWHISTELL

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

Fourth paperback printing 1985
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 77-122379
ISBN: 0-8122-7605-1 (cloth)
ISBN: 0-8122-1012-3 (paper)

Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Howard King
Composition by Graphic Services, Inc.

Editor's Note

THIS book contains a selection of Ray L. Birdwhistell's essays on body movement and human communication, some published here for the first time, others published before in widely scattered places.

Birdwhistell views communication as a process to which all participants in an interaction constantly contribute by messages of various, overlapping lengths along one or more channels (such as language, movement, and smell), whose elements are culturally patterned. With the aid of movie cameras and slow-motion projectors, he has analyzed many motions in detail—especially those which Americans make while talking, and their relation to American English. He has also devised two transcription systems for recording body movement.

Part I includes the less technical essays, especially those dealing with children's learning of kinesic systems and with communication in families. Part II contains some theoretical observations, Part III general principles and some specific findings on the American movement system. Part IV will hold interest especially for other researchers. Part V includes some of his latest thinking and a detailed analysis of an interview.

The author's theoretical viewpoint is summarized in essay 2 and developed more fully in essay 11; essays 26 and 27 apply it specifically to movement and speech. Some of his most central discussions concern communicational redundancy (pp. 85–91, 107–108), relevant time (pp. 158–166), the relations of communication to society and culture (pp. 50–56, 95–98, 250–251), and pathological miscommunication (pp. 15–25).

Birdwhistell has approved the selections and did much of the arranging. Bracketed footnotes to the text are mine.

BARTON JONES

Introduction

THESE essays are based on the conviction that body motion is a learned form of communication, which is patterned within a culture and which can be broken down into an ordered system of isolable elements. This book is not a journal of completed research. Nor is it designed as a textbook in kinesics. Neither is it a manual of instruction for those who would memorize annotational conventions and, without other training, buy a tape recorder or a motion analyst projector and turn movies into scientific documents. It is a book about the study of body motion, communication, and the need for the location of natural contexts of occurrence in the study of human behavior. These essays, an edited assemblage of published and unpublished writings, are not intended to be a finally integrated or comprehensive statement of kinesics and communication. It is my hope, however, that they will introduce the reader not already committed to particular lines of research or reasoning to the conception that the investigation of human communication by means of linguistic and kinesic techniques is desirable and relevant.

By 1959 systematic review of filmed material had provided evidence which supported the emergent assessment of kinesic morphology. The intense sessions at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in which linguists (Norman McQuown and Charles Hockett), anthropologists (Gregory Bateson and Ray Birdwhistell), and psychiatrists (Henry Brosin and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann) participated had produced a mass of data which demonstrated the interdependence of visible and audible behavior in the flow of conversation. Equally intense analysis and review sessions at the University of Buffalo, with the wise and talented assistance of H. L. Smith, Jr., and G. L. Trager, confirmed the conviction that it was not only possible but desirable to study interactional behavior by the exhaustive techniques of linguistics and kinesics. The advantages of working with naturalistic settings seemed to be demonstrated, too, by this devoted and concerted effort.

During the course of investigation, techniques were developed that reduced recording and analysis time (when working with con-

versants speaking American English) from about 100 hours per second to less than one hour per second. Because of the richness of a 10-second stretch (isolated for study, but always returned to context for comparative analysis), these methods, which gave us data at the rate of one hour of investigation per second of behavior, seemed efficient enough to use in larger research. The linguistic-kinesic method, however, was recognized to be a crude and nascent instrument. All of the co-workers agreed that it needed refinement and, more importantly, it needed testing. The method could be tested only by scientists trained to control it and the data it was designed to investigate.

The work of the author, of Albert Scheflen and Jacques Van Vlack has been supported in studies at Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute. Work plans originally evolved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Culture and Communication at the University of Louisville and given shape at the University of Buffalo seemed to need only a more adequate and reliable audio-visual hardware to be brought to fruition. Henry Brosin has been successful in recruiting a unit at Western Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute and Clinic. Norman A. McQuown and his students have been engaged in the demanding and tedious tasks of rechecking and refining the records collected earlier (1956) at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

Determinative influences came from the investigations of Eliot Chapple, Edward T. Hall, and Roger Barker. The logic of the structure of interactional style, as demonstrated by Chapple's interaction chronograph, while directed to data very different from our own, supported our conviction that whatever "meaning" is, it is not merely conventional understandings boxed in words. Edward T. Hall's penetrating observations of variant conceptions about space and of human dyadal space arrangements have provided a persistent stimulus to our attempt to comprehend multiperson social space arrangements in behavioral terms. In proxemics, Hall has pioneered directions in research which have stimulated a number of perceptive students and, along with the work of Robert Sommers and Roger Barker, he has laid the groundwork for observations of social interaction which are strongly influencing young workers to recognize the incompleteness of studies of word exchange as measures of social intercourse.

A sustaining influence has come from Erving Goffman, whose contributions to the sociological analysis of interactional activity,

from his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, through *Asylum* to *Encounters*, have pointed up the structures of the context within which, or by means of which, men interact with meaningful regularity. Of at least equal importance has been Goffman's challenge to linguistic-kinesic investigators to recognize the hiatus which exists between linguistic-kinesic units and those necessary to investigate the social situations he has isolated.

Still another aspect of the research climate was provided by a series of scholars who sought to examine selected and manageable slices of the interactional stream. R. E. Pittenger and J. J. Danehy had with Hockett provided an intense and extended analysis of a stream of a speech sliced from a psychiatric encounter. G. F. Mahl and A. T. Dittmann, with differing procedures, selected bits of body motion and of paralinguistic behavior and treated them as heuristic units. Their results were heartening to us, for their data supported, in negative fashion, our contention that communication was multichannel and that communicational shapes are not to be found in microuniverses of paralanguage or gesture any more than they are to be discovered in words alone. While the work of Paul Ekman was to develop somewhat later than these, it too confirmed our decision to search for units based upon linguistic and kinesic analysis.

As will be shown throughout this volume, the theory and research of the structural linguist has provided the prime outside determinant of kinesic research techniques. However, the student who described kinesics as "pseudolinguistics" was misled by the nomenclatural conventions of kinesics which adapted linguistic forms for kinesic research in an attempt to facilitate and implement interdisciplinary research. From its inception as a discipline, kinesics has accepted structural and descriptive linguistic research techniques (particularly as these have been employed by anthropological linguists) as models which encourage the discipline required for the analysis of infracommunicational units and structure. My goal was to develop a methodology which would exhaustively analyze the communicative behavior of the body, and the linguist's insistence upon testing his data alternatively as unit and as structural component seemed a necessary and *minimal* rule of research procedure. Finally, linguistic methodologists, it seemed to me, had demonstrated better than any other behavioral scientists a technique which permitted description and structural analysis, while avoiding premature psychological and sociological explanations (*a priori* or *a posteriori*) of events whose manipulable reality was in linguistic structure.

This is an academic and probably unnecessarily pedantic way of saying that the course of kinesic research has been strongly influenced by the sensitive, tough, disciplined, and seemingly tireless linguistic scientists with whom I have been associated. I learned from John Broderius, who first forced me to face the artifacts of premature interpretation of signal behavior. Henry Lee Smith, Jr., and George L. Trager nurtured the writing of the *Introduction to Kinesics* and were later to teach me enough linguistics to help me forego further quasi-linguistic analysis. Norman A. McQuown, whose sensitive analytic mind and capacity for painstaking and creative work has consistently guided the attempt to correlate linguistic and kinesic material, and William Austin, who worked patiently with Sheflen and myself for a year, helped de-reify many linguistic concepts which we had come to overaccept. I must include Kenneth Pike, who, as I write, is gently but firmly forcing me to attend to phonetic pitch—a matter which I'd like to avoid, but which, as he points out, may contain some of the secrets of linguistic-kinesic interdependence—at least for American English. And finally, Fred Eggan and Margaret Mead, in very different ways, helped me leave the formal world of social structure to explore behavior without the sense that I was leaving anthropology, without the fear that I would lose the fellowship of my discipline.

All of these, among many others, shaped the original ideas which led to these writings. Yet the book would not have appeared if it had not been envisaged by Erving Goffman and brought into order by Barton Jones. Jones, a linguistics graduate student, dredged my writings and gleaned what he felt to be significant. He is another student from whom I have learned.

The material in this book is derived from a variety of researches done under the respective sponsorships of the University of Louisville, The University of Buffalo, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences with assistance from a Research Fellowship Award from the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute.

August 1969 RAY L. BIRDWHISTELL

Contents

PART IV. *Collecting Data: Observing, Filming, and Interviewing*

PART V. *Research on An Interview*

APPENDIXES

PART 1

Learning To Be a Human Body

1. *"There Was a Child Went Forth . . ."**

A HUMAN BEING is not a black box with one orifice for emitting a chunk of stuff called *communication* and another for receiving it. And, at the same time, communication is not simply the sum of the bits of information which pass between two people in a given period of time.

Let us suppose that some wealthy and benevolent foundation was impressed with the fact that the human organism is a fantastically sensitive system capable of receiving literally hundreds of thousands of bits of information and became so concerned with the implications of this that they were willing to support extended research into the nature of the interconnections between this organism and the remainder of the universe. Let us further imagine that we decided to make up an experimental *universe à deux* and put two human beings in an elaborate box, and then decided to record all the informational signal units that flowed into the box and were potentially receivable by its occupants. Theoretically, the various machines would feed to a master tape some 2,500–5,000 bits (and up to about 10,000) of information per second. These recorded bits are notations of minimally discernible changes in the sound, light, and odor stream. Obviously their identity as units is dependent on the refinements of the recording devices. However we refine it, we are already swamped by the flood of data. And if we were to play this game of astronomical numbers to its awe-full end, probably the lifetime efforts of roughly half the adult population of the United States would be required to sort the units deposited on one tape

* Adapted from "Contribution of Linguistic—Kinesic Studies to the Understanding of Schizophrenia." From *Schizophrenia—An Integrated Approach*, edited by Alfred Auerback. [The first excerpt points out how much information passes between two interacting people. The amount is so enormous that no human being could use or comprehend it unless it was culturally patterned; the second excerpt discusses how children become adapted to the communicational systems of their society.—B. J.]

record in the course of an hour's interaction between the two subjects! Nor is there any comfort in the thought of Univac's speedy digestive system. Univac could deliver stacks of counted units and further stacks of correlations, but at this level that is all we would have—stacks of figures. This kind of practical infinity play is all the more depressing if we are tough enough scientists to know that we deal with an interdependent universe which cannot include accidental, isolated, or finally meaningless units. Something is always happening, but if we just count signals, it has no more value than if nothing were happening. If we had to stop our studies at this point we might just as well go back to an atomistic and mentalistic model of a human being as a thing in itself. With such a model we are condemned to do our research on little balloons full of words which are somehow framed or filled out by gesticulation which we could dignify although not clarify by calling them *nonverbal communications.*

Fortunately, however, we do not have to engage in such elaborate census-taking in order systematically to analyze human interaction any more than we have to isolate and tag every molecule of water in order to do hydrography. All we need to do to make communication research efficient, manageable, and meaningful is to construct a methodology which will enable us to order our record so that we can isolate from it the testably significant classes of events.

* * *

The discussion here is centered around the introduction of the child into the communication system of the society. If the discussion is overgeneral or too programmatic, this very inadequacy will perhaps make manifest the need for research in this area.

The work of the ethologists and comparative psychologists in the last few years has forced us to re-evaluate our previous conceptions of the relationship between human and animal behavior. Many of us marveled at the intricacies of the associations (which we termed *genetically determined* and let it go at that) which are present in insect societies. We looked at apes and studied them somatically as carrying clues which might give us insight into the evolution of man. But, because of the nature of our theory and the tremendously difficult task of making sustained and verifiable observations, we were largely concerned with watching the behavior of individual animals. We described them as operating in groups,

or herds, or prides, or flocks and in anthropomorphic amazement projected upon them certain human characteristics, most of which were individually psychological in nature. Recently, however, we have been forced to review if not completely to revamp these conceptions. With the work of Tinbergen, Hess, Lorenz, Blauvelt, and others, it has become increasingly evident that social living is an adaptational imperative for the membership of many nonhuman species. As we became willing to forego simplistic arguments concerning heredity and, or rather versus, environment and turned to the behavioral description of critical developmental moments in the individual's life, atomistic theoretics began to give way before more dynamic system models.

These insights, plus the theoretical and technical achievements of the linguist and the kinesicist, in a new experimental world made possible by the sound camera, the slow-motion analyzer, and the tape recorder, have forced us to a re-evaluation of evolution. Such a re-evaluation has carried with it a new perspective on what we mean by *human behavior*—and by extension what is significant about the patterned interdependence of human beings. If we are willing to concede that the evolutionary ladder runs from the inorganic to the organic to the social and, finally, through many animal species to the human, we shall probably also be willing to re-evaluate our primary postulates as to the nature of man himself. Certainly we may find ourselves in a position which makes less conscionable any isolation of disease and particularly mental disease within man's epidermatic frontiers. We are ready to look with new eyes at the life history of an individual and to ask new questions about the violence we commit when we act as though we are dealing with a preformed and plastic personality shaped by isolated traumatic events.

Who knows how any human internalizes the conventional understandings of his social group to the extent that his social behavior becomes by and large predictable to other members of his group? Even the sketchiest survey of human societies reveals that he does this. There is little solace in a so-called "learning theory," although one is impressed with the brilliance of the learning experimentalist who can create a training situation in which human beings can be persuaded to deal with new information in a manner analogous to that apparently employed by white rats or Grey Walter's machines. The fact remains that infants from every society in the world can and *do* internalize the communicational system of that society in

approximately the same amount of time, so that the "normal" 6-year-old is able to move smoothly within the communication system of his society. There is no need to become involved in arguments for gestalt versus associational or any other model of learning. Years of carefully ordered observation and analysis of children in the learning situation are necessary before the mechanisms of this incorporation can be known, and the traditional learning experiment apparatus does seem inapplicable for this study. But one thing is clear. We cannot study the social behavior of a fish by taking him out of water. The child is a child in his world—the pieces he displays in a laboratory represent a very small and, perhaps, unrepresentative sample of his repertoire.

The child is born into a society already keyed for his coming. A system exists into which he must be assimilated if the society is to sustain itself. If his behavior cannot, after a period of time, become predictable to a degree expected in that society, he must be specially treated. In some societies the nonassimilator will be allowed to die; in others he may be given special institutional treatment. This special treatment can range from deification to incarceration. But ultimately the goal is the same: to make *that child's* behavior sufficiently predictable that the society can go about the rest of its business.

From a different point of view, depending upon the society's expectancy structure, the child must in a given period of time learn how to learn what the society expects of him, how to use this as a source of new learning, and he must learn how not to learn and to use that skill in not being diverted. Perhaps even more fundamental than this, his very survival depends upon his receiving and sending certain orders of message from and to those about him. The Spitz babies, like the Blauvelt kids and lambs, provide us with all too clear insights into the fact that the organism must receive certain kinds of stimulating experiences or it dies. We can combine the results of these suggestive experiments with the data provided by the sensory-deprivation studies and evaluate this insight in the light of our increasing knowledge about the complexity of the perceptive process. This outline of the problem of bringing a new member into society reveals a process so critical and complex that even the least impressionable student is inclined to wonder how we make it at all. This process is commonplace for every society. Yet the fact that we must, in every psychiatric setting, discuss this matter is testament to the fact that the process is not always successful.

We know so little about the dimensions of biological or social

time that we cannot say whether the infant and the society have a long or short time in which to accomplish the basic task of incorporation. We know only that it must be done and that some societies act as though there were very little time for this task while others do not even conceive of it as a problem. We may, however, make this generalization: in every society, before attaining membership in that society, the child must gain control of the pattern of, and be incorporated into, the communication system of the society. And, to repeat, in every society we know anything about, at least insofar as language is concerned, this occurs by the time a child is six years old. Now to state explicitly what was implied before: gaining control of language is not the simple accumulation of an aggregate of words; it is not the possession of a certain-sized vocabulary. Nor is the control of that infracommunicational system, body motion, made up of memorizing a list of facial expressions or gestures. Communication control is not achieved through a simple additive process which involves the accumulation of parcels of sounds or body motion which carry encapsulated chunks of meaning. Nor is it the slightly more complex matter of hooking together these pieces called *words* and *gestures* into little meaning trains called *sentences*. I use the word *simple* here in derision, for if this were the way we had to incorporate our communicational system, the human life span would not be long enough to permit us ever to achieve such control. Human culture is possible because we do not have to do it this way—because we learn in a patterned way.

Look for a moment at the pitifully little that is known about the rate and sequence of human language and motion incorporation. When I say "pitifully little," however, I imply no apology. Recent developments in linguistics and paralinguistics, in kinesics and parakinesics, at least make possible the systematic descriptive analysis of this developmental process. Even these few and very tentative descriptions, gathered from all too little observation, make it possible for us to envision a day when we can objectively analyze the communication behavior of a particular child and forecast his ability to adapt to his communicational milieu. For the linguistic material I rely on the observations of Smith and Trager, modified by discussion with Hockett and McQuown, and strained through my own conceptions which are, at least in part, the result of kinesic observation.

The number of sounds distinguishable from each other that the so-called vocal apparatus can make may run into the thousands,