



Contributions to the Sociology of Language

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by A. Fishman

The Relationship of Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Edited by
Mary Ritchie Key



Washington, February 16, 1977— President Carter paid a visit Wednesday to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and spoke briefly to employees there. Here, as he speaks, HEW Secretary Joseph P. Kamp (left) seems to be trying to emulate his boss.

Preface

This book has grown out of Wondering How People Communicate and Interact. It is the result of contact and correspondence between the authors who participated in this Wonderment. None of us feels that our statements are the last word on the subject; in a very large sense these contributions are the beginnings of research that consider the inextricable relationship of language and the movements that initiate and accompany it. Our beginning premise is that when human beings interact, language, in a linguistic sense, may or may not occur, but extralinguistic correlates *always* occur. Such correlates may be seen or heard — they may be movements of any part of the body or they may be noises produced by the vocal mechanisms. This study shows that the main channel of communication between human beings very often is not language. For some purposes, of course, such as where the communication is principally informative, language is the conveyor. But for other purposes in human interaction, such as expressive and directive communication, nonverbal correlates carry the heavy load in the dialogue.

But beyond our common goal, we authors don't always agree. In fact, one contributor hesitated about participating since his research differed sharply from another's. As editor, I encouraged differing points of view. I would recall the legend about the blind men and the elephant. In the early stages of discovery, we don't know why our hunches/methods/descriptions differ so sharply. Academic cliques are an insidious enemy to the search for knowledge. Strange bedfellows are needed. In looking at the list of contributors, one will note a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, as well as cross-cultural experiences.

My own background is linguistics, and at this stage in the research in nonverbal communicative behavior, few linguists are involved. This is seen in the scarcity of contributions by linguists to the bibliographies on nonverbal behavior. I believe this will change in time, for reasons made obvious in this volume. Sapir and Bloomfield, renowned linguists of the first half of this century, anticipated the notion that linguistic methodology would be useful to other disciplines in studies of human behavior. Subsequently the emic/etic concepts were set forth as useful ways to analyze other behaviors. These concepts are still not fully grasped; they still have not been given a fair trial. The interpretive power

of these concepts needs to be exploited in order to approach universal theories.

Since this book is intended to foster and encourage research, the references at the end of the book have been thoughtfully and selectively chosen. I am not of the school of thought that says a bibliography can be compiled by a computer. We hope this list will provide a working guide for research in the topics of this book. It is not a comprehensive bibliography on nonverbal behavior. My two previous books on nonverbal behavior were intended to fulfill that purpose, and might have been titled, 'All You Ever Wanted to Know About Nonverbal Behavior'.

One of the problems of research is that theory often changes faster than it can be published. By the time researchers begin to find the answers, the questions have been changed! This is as it should be; this distinguishes between investigative sciences and dogmatism. We realize (and my previous bibliographies have demonstrated) that we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. In our acknowledgement to the past, however, we do not want the future to be blinded by previous misconceptions. In my introductory comments I have tried to be respectfully aware of and appreciative of past findings, and at the same time sprightly imaginative and adventurous in creating and setting up explorations for the future. I do not believe that we will ever find the quarks by doing 'safe' research.

Lake Forest, Illinois
September 1977

Mary Ritchie Key

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PART I

Language and Nonverbal Behavior as Organizers of
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Language and Nonverbal Behavior as Organizers of Social Systems

A. BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF INTERACTION¹

Human beings, fully aware of mirages, optical illusions, and hallucinations, still are unable to describe or understand their own communicative behavior. They operate in a continuum of myths, clichés, misperceptions, and an ingenuous array of irrational behavior, at least by their own definitions of 'meaning' and 'logic'. Could it be that such behavior will be seen to be 'rational' if approached from another system of organization? Meaning is exceedingly variable, as was Proteus, who had the power of taking on various aspects or characteristics. Because of the protean nature of meaning, perhaps we will never arrive at a theory of linguistics or a theory of meaning in the traditional ways.

The variability of communicative behavior is well illustrated in sociolinguistics, a subdiscipline of linguistics that looks at the varieties of language. Even with the givens of the seemingly infinite variety of human expressions, linguists are committed to the idea that all of these varieties follow sets of rules. In order to grasp how complicated, but still orderly, this is, we might use the analogy of a chess game. Steiner has noted the possible variants in a game of chess (quoted in Carpenter 1972: 157):

The number of possible legitimate ways of playing the first four moves on each side comes to 318,979,584,000. Playing one game a minute and never repeating it, the entire population of the globe would need two hundred and sixteen billion years to exhaust all conceivable ways of playing the first ten moves.

Perhaps we may come to realize that it is impossible to define communication from the point of view of linguists who have been struggling with the definitions of language and meaning. From another point of view we may come to recognize that language is primarily a system of accommodation, to get from one point in time to another point in time,

and to get from one relationship or situation to another. As walking is a system to get from one place to another — in *space* — so language is a system to get from one place to another — in *time* (Key 1977a:21). A biologist says, ‘. . . a name or a sentence functions as a tool to produce an appropriate reaction in another person’ (Young 1960:91). The study of language, then, would go beyond the study of sounds and syntax. The focus, or orientation, would be concerned with how the organism survives and maneuvers in its universe.

Human beings can be viewed as certain organisms in a particular environment. All organisms are in an interactional situation — with each other and with the environment. As Jacob von Uexküll skillfully analogized, no organism is a mere spectator. It is a reactor and an actor in a dramatic and dynamic world. According to Von Uexküll (in Bertalanffy 1955), an organism:

. . . cuts out . . . a small number of characteristics to which it reacts and whose ensemble forms its “ambient” (*Umwelt*). All the rest is nonexistent for that particular organism. Every animal is surrounded, as by a soap-bubble, by its specific ambient, replenished by those characteristics which are amenable to it. If, reconstructing an animal’s ambient, we enter this soap-bubble, the world is profoundly changed: Many characteristics disappear, others arise, and a completely new world is found (248).

This organism has a limited number of possibilities of behavior, such as in a chess game — possibilities that are unique to each particular organism — in a world which other organisms cannot identify, nor approach. Any stimulus (or behavioral event, if we may) is experienced not as it is, but as the organism reacts to it. If we look at language as the expressive behavior of this acting and reacting organism, we might see it as more ritualistic and symbolic than we have heretofore realized. In this sense, verbal and nonverbal expressions are a means of establishing and maintaining contact or interaction between people and the environment, as well as rejecting and breaking relationships. Communication can be seen as a means of integrating self and developing a self-image in order to cope with relationships. One has to validate oneself before one can relate to others in the social paradigm. Thus one chooses one’s own inventory of speech acts and nonverbal acts from the vast array of possibilities in the varieties of language.

The use of language as a system of accommodation, to get from one point in time to another point in time, is illustrated in Edward Hall’s most recent book (1977), where he describes the continuous conversational behavior of a group of Spanish-American workers. The