

Nonverbal Phrases in Prose

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While reading the literature of another culture, all sorts of descriptions of movements and expressions are given. Consider the following passage:

She moved toward me. Independent observers might not have noticed any motion, but I did. It consisted of a slow inhalation, a pursing of the lips, a gentle lift and resettling. For Lydia, it took the exertion of a pole vault. ¹

The series of actions as described in English conveys what may be a rather simple situation to the native reader. Lydia is thinking about something and making up her mind to say something about it. The gentle lifting and resettling of the head probably shows that she has decided to say something about it. The suggestion is that the subject is somewhat difficult for her, since much exertion is involved in a pole vault. Such phrases are important to interpret correctly, because the author may not indicate in words what was on the character's mind. In a case such as this, the prose description of a nonverbal behavior carries meaning for the native speaker. A person from another culture who has little experience or training in this area may not be able to understand the general meaning behind the behavior.

This article deals with such nonverbal phrases in written form. The whole study of communicative competence in a second language involves not only the verbal abilities but the nonverbal communication abilities as

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well. At an advanced stage of the acquisition of nonverbal competence, the learner should have acquired the ability to recognize meaningful nonverbal behavior in written form as well as in direct observation. The research on which the article is based is part of a large project on nonverbal communication involving scholars from the USA, Japan and Korea. The Akiyama article which follows is another product of that cooperative research. Other articles on different aspects of the research have appeared in the first two volumes of this journal

Introduction

Observing the nonverbal behavior of a speaker of another language after learning that person's nonverbal system helps to gain competence in understanding the meanings involved. Training can make use of native speakers, film, video, laser disk technology and student participation to help students make progress in their learning. Observation and experience are major elements in the acquisition of the nonnative nonverbal communication system.

There is another area of cross-cultural contact where the acquisition of nonverbal communication competence is somewhat more difficult. When descriptions of nonverbal behaviors are encountered in written form, many of them might refer to ordinary movements without special meanings. For example, "he pressed the tip of his index finger against the tip of his thumb" could refer, among other things, to pinching an object between those digits or it could refer to the emblem "OK." When these phrases are encountered in print, there is no visual context which helps to disambiguate the possible meanings of the description. A native speaking reader may, of course, make errors in interpreting the description in such a case, but usually he is accurate in interpretation as long as the writer is from the same culture. In this case, there are differences in the nonverbal systems of England, the U.S.A., Australia and so on that cause special difficulties, yet there is also a great overlap in the systems.

Just as the process of learning a language involves the acquisition of a number of linguistic skills, competence must also be acquired in the general communication system of a culture. Communicative competence is the category of language acquisition that embraces the study of elements of communication outside the basic linguistic system of phonology, grammar, and vocabulary. These communication elements, both verbal and nonverbal,

include — but are not limited to — language styles, discourse strategies, slang, gestures, emblems, proxemics, facial expressions and, finally, nonverbal phrases used both in spoken and written forms.

The ages of acquisition of the basics linguistic competence are well known. By the age of puberty all the basic features of the native language have been established, including the late features of syntax. Communicative competence is acquired along with linguistic competence. Children learn their area's unique dialect as they learn to speak. Gradually, they learn the appropriate discourse for certain situations. Over time, for example, children learn the display rules of their culture, such as not to talk or laugh during church service, through the modeling of their parents and the reinforcement of appropriate behavior through discipline. The acquisition of nonverbal communication requires the processes of recognizing the behavior, associating the behavior with its meaning, and modeling the behavior. Full acquisition is indicated by the recognition of the behavior in written prose.

When learning the language and culture of another group, there are a number of areas in which native speakers learned their basic information at an early age. The language itself is the best example, but there are also childhood word games, folk tales, proverbs, children's literature and so on which are usually not studied by the older learner of a second language.

Basic nonverbal communication is another such area. The nonverbal system appropriate to college or to business or other adult concerns are of course learned later and those systems can be learned relatively easily by a nonnative. However, even those areas are based on the system acquired during the preceding two decades or so of development. It is not surprising, then, that there are thousands of nonverbal expressions which can be understood by the native speaker which must be learned by the nonnative who wishes to be fluent in the language. A survey of the language textbooks used in most of the commonly taught languages in the U.S.A. indicated that only a few — if any — such phrases were included in the basic material and no systematic introduction to the subject existed in any of them. A systematic introduction could use the basic categories of nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal Phrases through History

Understanding earlier periods of one's own culture or of another culture is best accomplished by mastering the language of the earlier period or the other culture. Histories and literature at times include references to

nonverbal behavior which may have different meanings from the current meaning or may have a meaning unknown to most current members of the culture. One aspect of understanding in these cases involves studying the various nonverbal phrases which occur in the earlier material, for example, a Korean description of moving hands to forehead or in the Christmas poem Santa with finger alongside his nose.

Nonverbal Phrases

There are various ways of categorizing the types of expressions which are analyzed here. Some have been used for a long time and have become idioms, that is, phrases that do not have their literal meaning but have a meaning much different from the literal meaning. The phrase

"to catch red-handed"

refers to catching a murderer whose hands are still covered with the blood of his victim. Very few murders these days are associated with blood on the hands, but the phrase is from a time when swords and knives were the weapons of choice. These weapons could easily lead to the literal meaning of the phrase. The idiomatic meaning is that one is caught in the act of doing something forbidden or wrong. The phrase is a frequent one and few people seem to pay attention to the literal meaning at all.

The phrases treated in this article may be labeled under different headings in the various English dictionaries. Some of these phrases began as **slang** – words and phrases that were given a new meaning shared by a relatively small group of people. Slang can of course spread and become used by a large percentage of the population before the unabridged dictionaries include the word or phrase as a regular vocabulary entry. In popular usage, the label "slang" is still used even when the item has entered the vocabulary of the entire population. For example, "jive," "hip," "scat," and so on came from jazz performers decades ago and they have spread throughout the population. Even though they are not used as frequently any more, they are still encountered on a regular basis. A nonverbal behavior example is slang from surfing. "To hang ten" referred to hanging the ten toes over the edge of a surfboard while surfing and thus meant "to go surfing." The phrase is still called "slang" even though it has been in popular usage for many decades. The status of a slang word or phrase as a special use of language continues for a few generations.

Other phrases began as **colloquialisms**, the informal language which people say but seldom write. "Over my head" (q.v.) is in general use, but

would not be part of academic prose. Related to colloquialisms are **regionalisms**, also called **provincialisms**, which are informal words and phrases used in relatively restricted geographical areas. Through radio, TV and expanded travel, such informal or even casual usage spreads widely. Some of these phrases began as **jargon**, the technical vocabulary used in carrying out a particular job or profession. "Break a leg" meant "good luck" in the acting profession and the phrase spread and was eventually included in dictionaries. Given the popularity of some radio shows, TV programs and movies, some phrases used in them become **vogue** words or phrases. Some of the vogue items remain in the usage for centuries. Shakespeare's "a lean and hungry look" from "Julius Caesar" is in use today.

Any dictionary of slang, regionalisms, and so on documents the occurrence of hundreds of nonverbal items which have been in use for centuries. As noted, it is probably that most of the nonverbal phrases which have been used have disappeared since they were not part of the formal language use. The written documents of America, for example, were in more formal prose for the first few centuries after 1492 A.D.

Types of Nonverbal Phrases in Prose

The written version of nonverbal phrases can largely be classified as in the basic books on nonverbal communication. Even as emblems are the easiest to learn, since they are independently meaningful items, so also are they the easiest to recognize in print. The twenty-five examples of written nonverbal phrases are categorized below into the basic nonverbal categories and a general category which is more inclusive. The categories are to some extent overlapping. For example, haptics or touching behavior is not possible unless the distance between speaker and addressee is short. Two examples are given here as an introduction to the material below. The first one is under the headings of proxemics - since distance is involved - and of orientation, since the people involved are facing the same direction.

1 "We stood shoulder to shoulder on that issue."

The phrase "to stand shoulder to shoulder" could mean that the two were standing side by side, facing the same direction. If the final phrase had been "on that boulder," the literal meaning would have been the more probable. Since, however, the context is an abstraction, "on that issue," the nonliteral

meaning is intended here. The phrase refers to people who are allies against an opponent, as if they were in a line of soldiers who are about to be attacked. Literally, the two could be thousands of miles apart talking by telephone. They will, the phrase contends, work for and with each other on the issue being discussed.

The second example is in the area of haptics, since the phrase refers to physical contact.

2 "Lean on me."

The phrase "lean on me" could mean that the speaker is willing to help support the other person as they walk together. In most instances in print, the meaning is the the addressee can depend on the speaker for support and encouragement. The phrase is so common that a movie was made with that title. Ordinarily the phrase cannot be used except by people who know each other reasonably well. This restriction is part of the display rules of nonverbal behavior. The various types of examples below include information, where appropriate, on the display rule restrictions, on age level restrictions, male/female restrictions, and so on.

Interestingly enough, the phrase "lean on me" has the stated meaning when the speaker refers to self. When the phrase has a different object, the meaning is altogether different. "Lean on him" uses the idiomatic meaning of "lean on" which refers to psychological intimidation or physical force to accomplish some goal. Such usage is found in gangster movies, for example.

The examples of nonverbal phrases in print begin with the category of "Facial Expression."

Facial Expressions

There are many phrases which refer to a physical part of a facial expression and which mean the emotion or state which is conveyed by the expression.

3 "She kept a stiff upper lip."

This phrase refers to the process of keeping the lip from the trembling which occurs with the emotion of fear. The meaning is that the person referred to is

being brave. An example might be: "Mark kept a stiff upper lip when John threatened him with a libel suit." A person whose lips tremble when frightened may still be brave in action, but keeping the lips "stiff" shows courage.

Emblems

Since emblems involve not only a physical action but the location and direction, if any, of movement, a written description may be more than a few words.

4 "She crossed her fingers..."

The phrase refers to an action that might mean "good luck," "we're close friends," or "I'm joking/deceiving/lying." The meaning depends on the context and on the location of the hand after the fingers are crossed.

"She crossed her fingers behind her back."

The location behind the back indicates that she is joking or lying. The action is to be seen by third parties in the situation so that they will know that the speaker is not telling the truth. They may be being asked to keep the addressee from learning that he is being tricked or fooled. Children may perform this action to eliminate or weaken the force of a lie, such as when they tell their parents that they were studying when they were not. Parents may ask to see their children's hands when they are speaking to make sure the children are not performing this gesture.

In the context of talking about friends, the gesture most probably indicates that the speaker is indicating that the two friends are close friends, "buddies."

When someone is talking about an activity which will soon be done, the gesture probably means "good luck" in the activity.

Illustrators

Phrases may describe a physical activity occurring while a person is speaking.

5 "He thrust his jaw at the car as he spoke."

There are various ways of pointing [a deictic illustrator] other than using a finger. This is an example might also use "chin" in place of "jaw." Here the phrase "at the car" is important, because the act of "thrusting out the jaw" alone can refer to being belligerent, as in "he stuck his jaw in my face." Other deictics include "tilting one's head toward the car," and so on.

There are social variables at work in this category which involve display rules. For example, a child may point with the index finger in public, but as he matures he will learn that pointing in public is discourteous. On formal occasions, a person may indicate direction with a slight turn of the head, a slight motion of the arm or shoulder or eyes or so on. In written form, if an adult in a formal situation point with the finger or hand, it is clear that a strong emotion has just overridden the usual display rules and that something very serious has occurred.

Proxemics

Readers who are given no information about the relative position of the characters in the prose assume that the distance between them is "normal," that is, that the distance is appropriate to the situation, the relation between the people and so on. When the proxemics are mentioned, it often is the case that the writer is calling attention to a special situation or emotional state or so on. There are several common expressions which relate to proxemics.

6 "She was very standoffish."

This phrase refers to the fact that a person who is less friendly or so on than the situation warrants will stand further away than the normal distance. She is aloof, perhaps proud and arrogant, or perhaps only hesitant to engage in social interaction. The phrase is almost always a negative one.

Gaze behavior

7 "He narrowed his eyes when John said he didn't have the money."

Here the meaning is that he gets suspicious that something is wrong. Alternatively, a person described as having narrowed eyes might himself be a suspicious person.

Haptics

8

"She patted him on the head."

This phrase may only refer to encouraging words or noises or smiles or so on. No touching or patting needs to take place. The phrase suggests a parenting-type behavior and the person who is being patted may be uncomfortable with the behavior.

Several other types of nonverbal phrases occur, but in this short overview only a few will be given.

Common Examples of Nonverbal Phrases in Prose

The rest of this article covers seventeen other nonverbal behaviors which are commonly found in English prose. The organization of each entry follows the general pattern of:

Example sentences tested on several native speakers
Definition as understood by the native speakers
Etymology suggested by the native speakers
Category of nonverbal behavior

9

Entry:	Flared nostrils
Examples:	"When he heard what Sam said, his nostrils flared."
Definition:	To be or become angry.
Etymology:	One highly visible physical movement that occurs with the emotion of anger is a widening of the nostrils.
Category:	Facial expression

10

Entry: Turn up one's nose
Examples: "When she saw the janitor, she turned up her nose."
Definition: To sneer at, feel contempt for, or feel much superior to.
Etymology: The facial expression of contempt includes a tilting up of the head.
Category: Facial expression

11

Entry: Wrinkle one's nose ** Screw up, scrunch up

There are two different uses of this phrase.

11A

Examples: "When he entered the farmhouse, he wrinkled his nose."
Definition: To have distaste for; to be disgusted with
Etymology: A person who senses a bad smell may make the facial expression of disgust, which includes a movement of muscles in the nose area. The bad smell may also be metaphorical for something offensive.
Category: Facial expression

11B

Examples: "When we bought the puppy, he picked it up and wrinkled his nose at it."
Definition: To make a playful face at. The expression suggests pleasure.
Etymology: One way of playing with babies or pets is to wrinkle the muscles around the nose and tap noses (or pretend to) with the baby or pet. The facial movement is also used toward intimate friends and close relatives in private, playful situations.
Category: Facial expression

12

Entry: Keep a straight face
Examples: "Although the news was terrible, he managed to keep a straight face."
Definition: To prevent any usual facial expression from occurring.

Etymology: "Straight" in this phrase refers to lack of any facial movements, so that the face remains in its previous state.

Category: Facial expression

13

Entry: Put one's nose out of joint ** knock, slap, etc.

Examples: Her snide comment about his infantile behavior put his nose completely out of joint.

Definition: To cause one to become angry, upset, and/or resentful.

Etymology: A physical blow to the face can break a person's nose, giving the appearance that the nose is "out of joint" even though the nose has no joints. The phrase may refer to a verbal "blow" that offends the person's pride.

Category: Head related

14

Entry: "To play it by ear"

Examples: He doesn't know all the rules, but he can play it by ear.

Definition: To act without a preconceived plan

Etymology: The phrase originally referred to a musician who could not read music but who could play anything he or she heard.

Category: Head related

Note: "Play by ear" is a phrase that retains the original meaning as above.

15

Entry: Eyes peeled

Examples: Keep your eyes peeled for the nearest rest area ahead.

Definition: To be observant and aware; to watch out for something

Etymology: Likening eyelids to the image of peels, literally keeping the eyes open and aware.

Category: Head related

16

Entry: Have eyes in the back of the head

Examples: To be a good mother, sometimes you have to have eyes in the back of your head.

Definition: To be very aware; omniscient

Etymology: Exaggerated image of awareness; seemingly omnilateral vision as if one could see the behind oneself.

Category: Head related

17

Entry: Speak through both sides of the mouth

Examples: Mary talks out of both sides of her mouth. She tells me she hates John, but she tells John's brother that she likes him.

Definition: To be misleading, to give two different views on one topic

Etymology: A derivation of speaking through the side of the mouth-by not using the full mouth, the speaker does not really mean what is being said; to speak through both sides of the mouth, the speaker does not mean either of the contradictory statements made.

Category: Head related

18

Entry: Money where your mouth is

Examples: "If you really think the Braves will win the World Series, then put your money where your mouth is."

Definition: A challenge to back up one's talk with money

Etymology: Has gambling origins, gamblers were challenged to back up their predictions with a monetary bet Now used extensively, not limited to gambling.

Category: Head related

19

Entry: Give lip service

Examples: "President Clinton only gave lip service to voters with his 'No Tax on the Middle Class' promise."

Definition: To say something without meaning

Etymology: Figuratively, the lips move to form the words but because there is no "voicing" of the utterance, the person did not really say the phrase.

Category: Head related

20

Entry: Beat one's gums

Examples: "He tried to convince Mr. Pitman, but he was just beating his gums."

Definition: To talk without effect

Etymology: A very old, perhaps senile, person may have no teeth (hence, "gums") and may not make any sense when talking.

Category: Head related

21

Entry: Cut one's own throat

Examples: "He tried to explain why he stole the car, but he only cut his own throat."

Definition: To implicate oneself completely in a wrong or in a difficult position.

Etymology: This act of suicide is metaphorically extended.

Category: Head related

22

Entry: Ram something down someone's throat

Examples: He respected the woman's religious beliefs, but did not like having them rammed down his throat.

Definition: To force an idea or concept on someone

Etymology: Exaggeration of the idea of force-feeding one's ideas in an imposing, stifling manner.

Category: Head related

23

Entry: Nose will grow

Examples: "Clinton's nose grew 10 inches during the campaign."

Definition: To lie.

Etymology: In the children's classic "Pinocchio," the puppet who became a boy had a nose which grew longer each time he lied.

Category: Head related

24

Entry: Catch it in the neck

Examples: "Steve thought no one knew he had ruined his shirt, but when his mother came home he caught it in the neck."

Definition: To bear the brunt of the punishment; to be punished severely.

Etymology: In long past centuries, the major punishment was having your head cut off.

Category: Head related

25

Entry:	Throw up one's hands
Examples:	"After ten tries to use his new computer, Greg threw up his hands."
Definition:	To surrender, give up, stop trying.
Etymology:	Holding up one's hands indicates one has no weapon, thus surrendering. In general usage, "throwing" up one's hands is an emotional act of giving up, as if exasperated by failure.
Category:	Emblem

Conclusion

Nonverbal behavior in prose can be difficult to interpret, especially for those from a background other than the author. For example, American readers of English may have trouble with vocabulary, phraseology, and nonverbal descriptions in English prose from Great Britain, Australia, and so on. Nonverbal behavior descriptions are not always an integral part of the study of a language, so that a language learner may have learned to be essentially bilingual in linguistic competence and yet be almost a beginner in nonverbal communicative competence. The reader of the literature of another cultural always has difficulties in this area.

There is yet another difficulty involved in the nonverbal features in literature. Much of the culturally important literature of a country is in the more formal style of language. Popular novels are more like TV shows and movies in that they make more use of the informal characteristics of communication. Language learners can be encouraged to read more widely in the culture of their choice, but without some reference book or other guidance they may not be aware that certain behaviors that occur have a second meaning. Even if they become aware that another meaning must be intended, they may not know what the second meaning is, especially if the meaning comes from the informal characteristics that might not be included in the dictionaries. The process of language learning is time-consuming and difficult, so that the addition of a great deal of information in the program might not be feasible. Special books, programs, and videotapes can complement the language program.

The nonverbal phrases given above and the thousands more that exist in English are all rather commonly found in conversation and occur as well in prose. The advanced student of a language will encounter these types of phrases which have their own special meanings. In the interpretation of the works of some major authors, it may be the case that these subtle features are more important for the overall interpretation of the novel or story than the literal meaning of the words. The brief overview in this article is intended to suggest the range of variation that exists in the use of nonverbal behaviors in prose.

Notes

1. Jonathan Gash. *The Very Last Gambado*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1990. p. 226.