
Kinesics in Multimodal Communication: the Main Uses of Head Movements

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I. Abstract

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This paper presents a compilation of the major head movements in communication as well as their main uses and meaning. Bearing in mind those variables, a real interactive situation was examined in order to analyse the frequency of kinesics in conversation. Results suggest that head movements, in this specific conversation, are used in three particular situations. This confirms previous research which stated that the meaning conveyed by kinesics in conversation is even more important than words themselves.

Keywords: Multimodal communication, kinesics, head movements, nonverbal, meaning

II. Introduction

There is no doubt that verbal communication plays a major role in our daily life. In fact, an accurate communication is the foundation of success in communication process with other people. However, a study carried out by Mehrabian (1967) has stated that words only conveyed the 7% of the meaning in a conversation. The rest of the message is expressed through two main aspects of multimodal communication: kinesics (55%) and paralanguage (38%). On the one hand, kinesics encompasses all body movements such as facial expressions, gestures, postures and eye behaviour. On the other hand, paralanguage refers to speech modification, vocalization or speed in talking among others (Key, 1975).

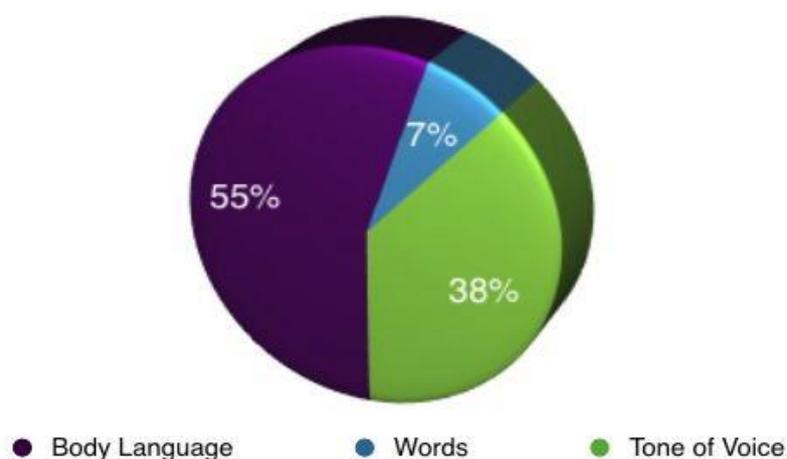


Figure 1. Mehrabian's formula

The study of non-verbal features in communication has received the attention of scholars such as Cheng (2004) or Poyatos (1983) in the last

decades. However, there are still many questions concerning the interpretation of complex multimodal aspects. In the light of these facts, multimodality takes a decisive function in communication; as Mehrabian (1967) pointed out, kinesics and paralanguage greatly affect in the interpersonal meaning of the communication. Therefore, the aim of this research is to further analyse the significance of kinesics in multimodality communication and also consider its relevance in a second or foreign language (L2) learning process.

III. Variables to take into account in kinesics

There are several aspects that need to be considered in the study and interpretation of non-verbal behaviour i) the correlation of kinesics with discourse; ii) with meaning or iii) with phonology (Kellerman, 1992). Nonetheless, I will not cover all these approaches in this paper; I will rather focus on a particular gesture in kinesics: head movements.

Head movements are among the most common kinesics forms in conversation, since they can convey multilayering meanings and mark the structure of the ongoing discourse. In fact, a head movement can be the equivalent of “a direct verbal translation or dictionary definition, usually consisting of a word or two or perhaps a phrase” (Ekman and Friessen, 1969:63). Based on the studies of Kendon (2002) and Mc.Clave (2000) I will summarize the main uses of head movements by the speakers, and their meaning. These are:

–The head shake or nod serves to affirm and negate when it acts as the equivalent of the linguistic particles *yes* and *not*. It usually occurs in *yes/no* responses.

–The head movement is also employed when a speaker is making a statement that contains a affirmation or a negation. In this use, the head movement reinforces the statement – either affirmative or negative – and adds ‘intensity’ or ‘force’ to the utterance.

–The head movement is used in an utterance in order to express a different meaning in addition to the content conveyed in words. It is usually found when the speaker shows doubts or is not completely convinced of what he/she is asserting.

–The lateral head shakes are employed while the speaker is talking about a topic in a superlative form (i.e. *very very old*, or *the most beautiful*); or when he/she is intensifying the meaning of the utterance. It is often expressed with lexical choices such as *very*, *a lot*, *great*, *really*, *exactly*, *so*, and the like.



–The head sweep from left to right is used while saying words such as *whole* or *everybody* to mark their inclusivity. This movement usually co-occurs with plural pronominal forms (i.e *we*, *them*) and with the support of other body gestures.

–Lateral head movements also co-occur in statements in which the speaker shows his/her uncertainty by the use of *I guess*, *I think*, *whatever*, *whoever*, and similar expressions.

–Head movements serve to mark changes from indirect to direct discourse. When we introduce a direct quote in our speech, our head is moved to one side as a way of imitating the other person's speech; but then it returns to neutral position.

–The head movement is employed in listing or presenting alternatives, as a spatial conceptualization of entities.

IV. Method

To this point, the researchers Kendon (2002) and Mc.Clave (2000) have considered the major head movements variables in conversation. I now want to determine the frequency of use of these variables in a real interactive situation.

Thus, to carry on this study, I examined a video recording taken from Youtube¹ that lasts 7 minutes. It is an excerpt of the interview between Katie Holmes and David Letterman on the talk show host *Late Show with David Letterman* broadcasted on November 7th in 2010 by CBS television, America's top Network. However, there are other things to take into account:

1. Participants

The subjects in this study are two native speakers of American English (female and male between the ages of 30 and 65), which were filmed in a television studio while having a conversation. It needs to be noted that both participants are famous people; since David Letterman is a world renowned television presenter and comedian, and Katie Holmes works as an actress in films and serials. The fact that they are involved into the field of interpretation made of them the most suitable people for being analysed because they should have been carefully taught how to use kinesics in conversation to reinforce the message.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFRlJ1rKlU&feature=related>

2. Video recording features

Two cameras sited in different angles recorded both participants. However, one of the cameras closely framed the upper body of the interviewee allowing a clear observation of the head movements. For that reason, taking into account the lack of visual access to the other interactant, just Katie Holmes' head movements were analysed.

3. Steps followed in the method

Once I had focused on Katie Holmes' speech, I noted down all her uses of head movements while talking. Then, in order to achieve the meaning of that movements, I transcribed what she was saying while shaking her head. This was an accurate job since the identification of head movements was only possible by slowing down the video recording repeatedly. Finally, I organized the examples provided from the interview according to the variables previously stated.

V. Results and discussion

Taking into account the variables previously exposed, the results of the study determine that the most common head movements in the analysed conversation are employed in these three cases:

1. When the speaker is making a statement that contains an affirmation or a negation.

Table 1. Results from the conversation between Katie Holmes and David Letterman

Minute	Transcription
00:00:30	D: I know that things are going on. K: <u>Yes, yes.</u>
00:02:30	D. Last time you where there in the New York City. K: <u>I did</u>
00:02:43	D: But this is the real deal isn't it? K: <u>Yes, all my sons.</u>
00:04:08	D: Did it help the cough at all? K: <u>Yes, yes</u> ... (laughs) D: [...] Sometimes if you have a cough and you have to do a performance, the distractions can take the symptoms away. K: <u>Right, definitely.</u>
00:04:55	D: And your little girl ... you mentioned was four and a half. She knows now that her father and her mother are both actors, right? K: <u>Yes.</u>

00:05:50	D: It would be the worst thing if she were in the world business? K: <u>No</u> ... it's beautiful ! D: But show business is so ugly, isn't it really? I mean, when you think about it, it really is! K: <u>I don't know</u> !
00:06:20	D: But life is full of rejections! [...] K: <u>I know, I know.</u>

2. When the speaker is intensifying the meaning of the utterance

Table 2. Results from the conversation between Katie Holmes and David Letterman

Minute	Transcription
00:01:00	D. Do you feel emotion about your little girl growing up? K: Well, I am just <u>enjoying</u> ,you know, every single day and ... they, they grow so much faster than you think. I mean, I thought she was gonna be an infant for a year and that wasn't the case ... And now she's <u>running</u> all the time, and she's just <u>so bright</u> ...
00:02:44	K: [...]You know, so very dramatic and I <u>love</u> the were such prose, it was really ... <u>so wonderful</u> .
00:04:30	D: Are you gonna do more stage activities? K: I'd <u>love to</u> . I <u>really enjoyed</u> it with Dianne and John... It was just <u>wonderful</u> .
00:06:57	K: We have been in Toronto cause I'm doing a Canadian series [...] and we've been filming there, which has been <u>wonderful</u> . It's <u>so beautiful</u> up there.

3. When the speaker is introducing a direct quote in the speech

Table 3. Results from the conversation between Katie Holmes and David Letterman

Minute	Transcription
00:01:20	K: She was doing something when I said "Who is the fastest in the family?" and she said " <u>I'm the fastest in the family. Me, me.</u> "
00:04:55	D: She knows that ... Well, probably she's gone to the play, I guess. K: Actually, after about four or six weeks doing the play I had her come. And one of the lasts performances ... she was only two,[...] she said " <u>Sorry sorry, no dad!</u> "

*Note: *D* is used referring to David Letterman, and *K* to Katie Holmes

Results have also revealed that many head movements used while speaking are patterned and have a meaning implied (McNeill, 1992). Therefore, being aware of the message expressed in every head movement speakers will be able to contribute significantly in conversation.

VI. Limitations to Mehrabian's formula

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Mehrabian's findings have found, however, the opposition of many public speaking coaches and presentation trainers who consider the 55 %, 38 % and 7 % rule a fallacy. One opponent to this view is the Dr. C.E. "Buzz" Johnson, who wrote in the July 1994 issue of *Anchor Point* magazine: «...If these percentages were really valid it would mean that the learning of foreign languages could be greatly abbreviated. After all, if the words only account for 7% of the meaning of communication, we should all be able to go to any country in the world and simply by listening to the tone and carefully observing body language, be able to accurately interpret 93% of their communications!».



Figure 2. Andy Riley's cartoon

However, in his work *Lend Me Your Ears: All You Need to Know about Speeches and Presentations*, Mehrabian (2005) said «I am obviously uncomfortable about misquotes of my work. From the very beginning I have tried to give people the correct limitations of my findings. Unfortunately the field of self-styled 'corporate image consultants' or 'leadership consultants' has numerous practitioners with very little psychological expertise.»

Of course, there are several limitations of the study's applicability to real life. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Mehrabian has been quoted out of context by the popular press, as he (2005) was conscious of the limitations in his study. However, Mehrabian just wanted to enhance the power of paralanguage and kinesics in communicating the speaker's attitude and feelings. Then, while the most important thing in a presentation is the message itself, the delivering of the message is what makes it grab the emotions of the audience or not.

VII. Conclusion and pedagogical implications

The above research has shown the significant role of kinesics in conversation from a multimodal perspective. The results obtained after the analysis of a conversation based on eight variables bring to the fore the three main uses of head movements by the speakers in that particular conversation. Therefore, this study reveals that movements made by the head are manifestations of concepts that are expressed nonverbally (McNeill, 1992). That is why more attention should be paid to the nonverbal features in order to success in communication process with other people.

This preliminary investigation into the uses of the head movements encourages me to think that a much more thorough study of it would be worthwhile. Moreover, the results of this kind of approach can find pedagogical applications in a second or foreign language (L2) learning process.

VIII. References

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