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Body Language

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Synonyms

[Nonverbal communication](#)

Definition

Body language refers to the aspect of communication that is transmitted nonverbally (and automatically) through body movements.

As such, body language strictly speaking refers only to behaviors such as facial, vocal and postural expressions, touch, proxemics, and gaze but not to stable features such as physical attractiveness and facial morphology or (conscious) behavioral choices such as hair style, clothing, and adornment. Yet, these elements of nonverbal behavior often interact with elements of body language, and hence the two terms are often used interchangeably.

The study of body language has a long tradition in psychology. In his seminal book on *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin (1872/1965) already commented extensively on body language in humans and animals.

His goal was to demonstrate the evolutionary continuity between emotion expressions in humans and animals, and he focused therefore on the many similarities between these expressions and laid the groundwork for the notion that body language is universal. Other early important works include the study of kinesics (body movement, Birdwhistell 1970) and proxemics (the study of personal space, E. T. Hall 1963). Important early overview articles were written in the early second half of the twentieth century (Duncan Jr. 1969; Miller et al. 1959; Wiener et al. 1972), and in 1972 a classic edited book was published by Hinde (Hinde 1972).

The notion that body language is universal is often voiced in sentences such as “A warm smile is the universal language of kindness” (William Arthur Ward). Evidence (albeit not undisputed) for universality has been found for (facial) emotion expressions (see Hareli and Hess, ► [Facial expressions and emotion](#)) and the signaling of dominance and sociality (Bente et al. 2010; Senior et al. 1999). By contrast, the meaning of gestures is typically highly culture dependent (Kita 2009).

Research on body language has addressed both the communication of states in humans and animals – most often emotions – and the communication of traits. The latter both with regard to the expressive features that characterize certain traits, for example, “the loud voice of extraversion” (Scherer 1978), and with regard to first impressions in humans. However, the field is overall heavily biased toward the study of emotional

facial expressions (see Hareli and Hess, *Facial expressions and emotion*). In what follows, I will focus on the communication of emotions through channels other than the face and the communication of traits, with emphasis on dominance and affiliation.

Emotion communication. Next to facial expressions (see Hareli and Hess, *Facial expressions and emotion*), voice, posture, and touch also signal emotions. There are two main approaches to classifying emotional speech. On one hand, human perceivers can be asked to listen to voice excerpts and decode the emotions expressed. On the other, acoustic features of the emotional voice such as pitch, duration, and intensity or voice quality features can be measured and related to the intended emotion (Juslin and Scherer 2005). Research employing the judgment study paradigm was able to ascertain that so-called basic emotions (happiness, anger, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise) at least are well recognized in speech, but early attempts at acoustic analysis were not always as successful (Banse and Scherer 1996). However, newer approaches in affective computing using more sophisticated analysis algorithms have started to make inroads in that regard (Schuller and 2011).

Darwin's (1872/1965) descriptions of emotion expressions contained many descriptions of emotional postures in both humans and animals. Early studies by Bull and colleagues (e.g., Bull and Gidro-Frank 1950) suggested that some basic emotions can be recognized from postures and in recent years interest in postures has blossomed again. Work on static expressions suggests that at least the basic emotions can be well recognized from postural cues alone (see Atkinson 2013, for a review). Other work has shown that basic emotions can also be recognized from gait at levels ranging up to 92% correct for sad and fearful expressions (Schneider et al. 2013). In addition, emotions such as pride and others that are not considered as basic (mainly because they are not associated with a prototypical and unique facial expression) seem by contrast to have a universal postural component (Tracy and Matsumoto 2008).

Despite early research suggesting a relationship between emotion and touch (Clynes 1977),

research on touch has been mostly focused on its use as a function of intimacy (Burgoon 1991; McDaniel and Andersen 1998) and as a cue to relative power. The latter is based on Henley's (1973) notion of a touch privilege for individuals higher in power. However, the findings in that regard remained mixed; even though there is some evidence for differences in touching between men and women, these differences are not systematically related to power or status differences (Hall 1996; Hall and Veccia 1990). However, more recently touch has been found to communicate anger, fear, disgust, love, gratitude, and sympathy at better than chance levels (Hertenstein et al. 2006). There is also evidence that squeezing touch is better for communicating unpleasant and aroused emotional intention, whereas finger touch is better for communicating pleasant and relaxed emotional intention (Rantala et al. 2013).

Person perception. Correct judgments of personality characteristics can be made based on very "thin slices" of behavior, that is, extremely short exposures to what may appear to be minimal information (Ambady et al. 1995; Ambady and Rosenthal 1992), including static photos of only the eye region (Rule et al. 2009). One important source of such judgments is facial appearance (Zebrowitz 1997) and emotion expressions (see Hareli and Hess, *Facial expressions and emotion*).

Dominance and affiliation are basic human social orientations (Leary 1957) which are transmitted through nonverbal behavior. Thus, stable features such as a square jaw, high forehead, or heavy eyebrows cross-culturally connote social dominance (Keating et al. 1981; Senior et al. 1999). On the other hand, a rounded face with large eyes, thin eyebrows, and low facial features – a baby face – connotes approachability (Berry and McArthur 1986). The same information is also transmitted via emotional facial expressions due to the perceptual overlap between these expressions and the stable features. Of these, anger, happiness, and fear displays have been shown to be associated with perceived dominance and affiliation. Accordingly, drawing the eyebrows together in anger leads to increased attributions of dominance, whereas smiling leads to increased

attributions of affiliation (Knutson 1996). Similarly, it has been argued that fear expressions elicit affiliative reactions (Marsh et al. 2005). As such, emotional expressions can also be used to infer behavioral intentions (Hareli and Hess 2010). In ratings of neutral faces the resemblance of certain facial features to emotion expressions drives the attribution of behavioral intentions to faces (Zebrowitz et al. 2003).

Next to facial features and expressions, body posture cross-culturally signals dominance and affiliation. Thus, postures that increase perceived size (legs spread apart, arms akimbo) tend to communicate dominance, whereas orientation toward the interaction partner tends to signal sociability and affiliation (Bente et al. 2010). As Darwin already noted, these signals tend to be similar across species (see Weisfeld and Beresford 1982 for a comparison of human and primate dominance behaviors). The similarity is not limited to primates; thus, in domestic dogs a high posture (head up and tail upright, ears pricked, straight back, and straight legs) also signals dominance (van der Borg et al. 2015).

Affiliation cues are often more ambiguous and complex than dominance cues. One aspect that has been noted early is that affiliation is often signaled by open postures and an orientation toward the interaction partner, especially by women (Mehrabian 1969). More recent research suggests that a potent cue to affiliation may be not so much the orientation of the individual but the synchronization of nonverbal behaviors between individuals (Hess and Fischer *in press*). Mimicry – the imitation of the nonverbal behavior of others – results in synchronized behavior between interaction partners. Both the imitation of postures and gestures (Chartrand and Lakin 2013) and the imitation of emotion expressions (Hess and Fischer 2013, 2014) have been shown to not only depend on affiliation but also to foster affiliation. Thus, people mimic others' behavior more in contexts when participants have positive rather than negative attitudes toward each other, when they are similar rather than dissimilar, when they belong to the same rather than a different group, or when they want to cooperate rather than to compete with each other. Moreover, the relationship is not

unidirectional, in that mimicry also serves to increase perceived similarity and liking (see Hess and Fischer *in press* for a review).

Gestures. Another important domain of body language is gestures. Speech is typically accompanied by gestures, even when these, for example, on the phone, cannot be seen by others. This link can be observed even in congenitally blind children, albeit at much reduced rates (Iverson et al. 2000). Emblems or conventionalized gestures are gestures that have a specific transcribable meaning. Examples are finger gestures for victory or peace or head shakes as well as pointing gestures. These vary between cultures, for example, in much of Europe no is signaled by a head shake, but in Greece and regions influenced by Greece a head toss up is used (Morris et al. 1979). In pointing gestures, the fingers and palm positions vary as well as the movement pattern. Reasons for such variations include whether relative or absolute frames of reference are used or how time is conceptualized in space. Thus, many cultures map the future to the front of the person and the past to the back, but other mappings exist as well. The availability of words and syntactic features of languages also entrains differences in the accompanying gestures (for a review see Kita 2009). Politeness rules also impact on gestures. Thus, in Ghana where the use of the left hand is taboo for giving or eating, left-handed pointing is also taboo (Kita and Essegbey 2001). Another variable aspect regards the space used by gestures as shown in a classic study by Efron who compared Southern Italian and Eastern European Immigrants to New Yorkers (Efron 1972).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Facial Expressions and Emotion](#)
- ▶ [Vocal Communication of Emotion](#)

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