

## Constructing Identities

John Stewart, Karen E. Zediker, and Saskia Witteborn

Now that we've defined communication and interpersonal communication, the next step is to think about the people who engage in it. For most of the past 300 years, westerners have generally understood people to be individuals—separate, singular selves. But in the last half of the 20th century, some European and American researchers rediscovered an idea that had been clear to our Greek forebears and to most members of Eastern cultures for a long time: Humans are more than singular individuals. We are relational beings, unique selves mixed from many ingredients. The readings in this chapter develop this understanding of humans as *communicators*.

I introduced this idea in the first reading of Chapter 2 when I said that communication always involves negotiating identities or selves. Every time you or I communicate with anybody, one thing we're doing is mutually working out who we are for and with each other. Identities are always in play.

One way to talk about this identity negotiation or identity management part of communication is to use the vocabulary of "co-constructing selves," which is what Karen Zediker, Saskia Witteborn, and I do in this reading. This essay comes from a basic interpersonal communication text that the three of us wrote together. We begin with some examples of how this co-construction process operates to demonstrate that it's going on all the time. We point out that, since it is a continuous process, nobody always does it perfectly or poorly. As we emphasize, there is no one best or worst way to participate in this process. There are just outcomes of how you do it, results that people may or may not want. We also make the point that this process goes on in every culture, wherever humans communicate. And the reason it's important to understand this process is that when you want to influence where your communicating is on the impersonal-interpersonal continuum explained in Chapter 2, you need to pay attention to how you're co-constructing selves.

We define identity or self as a constellation of features or labels that establish social expectations that we have of ourselves and others. Then we contrast old and new views of identities. We point out that the individualistic, Western view is very narrow and that increasing numbers of researchers and teachers are recognizing that identities are relational and multidimensional.

This multidimensionality is part of the first of the four characteristics of identities or selves that we discuss. The second is that selves are responders. No human starts behaving from ground zero, so that everything we do can be understood to be in reply or answer to something else. The third feature is that identities are developed in past and present relationships. The fourth characteristic is that identities can be both avowed and ascribed. This means that we can verbally and/or nonverbally "assert" an identity—avowal—and that others can ascribe identity features to us. This is one reason why it is important to be reflective about your communicating—because in every conversation you're not only expressing your ideas but also defining who you are.

This essay and the other readings in Chapter 3 will flesh out this basic understanding of how selves—who people are—get co-constructed in people's communicating.

on  
ities



## MAIN IDEAS

- Identity construction is happening in almost all communication, across all cultures.
- Identity construction processes significantly affect where your communication is on the impersonal–interpersonal scale.
- Identities are constellations of socially negotiated labels that establish expectations that we have of ourselves and others.
- In the past, identity was understood as an individual, *intrapersonal* thing.
- Current understandings of identity as primarily social have been affected by Eastern conceptions.
- One characteristic of identities is that they are multidimensional and changing.
- Second, selves are responders; they are context dependent and developed in interaction.
- Identities are also developed in past and present relationships.
- In communication, identities are both *avowed* and *ascribed*.

## WHAT IS IDENTITY OR SELF?

Notice what happens in the following conversation:

ALIA: Hi, just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Alia. I'm your new roommate. Just switched universities. Kind of sucks to move in your senior year, but well ...

CHERYL: Cool. I'm Cheryl. Nice to meet you, finally. I just knew that a girl named Alia—how do you pronounce your name?—would be my new roommate, that's all. Anyways, good to meet you. Any preference in terms of where you wanna sleep?

ALIA: Not really.

CHERYL: I'm just asking because I just got back from Germany. Exchange student, you know? I was sleeping in a dorm there and was glad that my roommate let me sleep by the window. I'm kind of claustrophobic. Ha-ha. Don't worry; otherwise I'm pretty much together. Let me guess where you're from. Honestly, you don't quite look as if you were from around here.

ALIA: Well, whatdaya think?

CHERYL: Greece. Oh no, Italy.

ALIA: Naaa.

CHERYL: Spain or South America?

ALIA: Wrong again. Born in Chicago, my parents are from Iraq. Where are you from?

CHERYL: Born in Detroit and raised in Oregon.

ALIA: So you are American, too?

"Constructing Identities" by John Stewart, Karen E. Zediker, and Saskia Witteborn from *Together: Communicating Interpersonally: A Social Construction Approach*, 6th Edition. Copyright © 2005. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

CHERYL: Absolutely, although it's not that important to me, really. No kidding. Could have sworn you were from Greece. My best friend in Germany looks like you, and she's Greek. Well, I feel stupid to ask this, but ... aren't you supposed to wear a scarf?

ALIA: Guess what? I am a Christian, Chaldean to be exact. Not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs. Islam's the biggest religion in the Arab world, but there're also lots of Christians.

CHERYL: Wow. Let's talk more about that. That's exciting. I'm living with an Iraqi woman.

ALIA: Iraqi American is better. I was born here. Chicago, remember?

CHERYL: You're right, I'm sorry I went off on this cultural thing. I'm really, really glad to finally live with someone who is from another culture. I'm still in a kind of culture shock, coming back to the States from Germany. That's why I'm so glad about you.

ALIA: Sure, but first, if you don't mind, could you show me around here? I need to register before classes start.

CHERYL: Yep, no problem. I'm sorry if I talked too much. Let's start with the library.

Cheryl and Alia are constructing identities together. At first, Cheryl gives Alia a national identity that Alia does not identify with. Cheryl does this mainly because of how Alia looks. Alia is the "Iraqi woman," even though she would probably have liked to be the *person* Alia first, or the senior who is new to the university. Cheryl, on the other hand, constructs herself as a curious and outspoken young woman, a student, and someone who has been exposed to different cultures.

This conversation shows how identities or selves are outcomes of conversations and something that we do, rather than are. Cheryl and Alia move from negotiating their student identities when they talk about being a senior and an exchange student, to negotiating their national and ethnic identities, and back to negotiating their student selves again. Alia does not want to be known only as an Iraqi and an Arab. She wants Cheryl to recognize her multiple identities as a woman, a student, a Chaldean Christian, and an Iraqi American. Cheryl also emphasizes that her national identity is not that important to her. At that moment, she wants to be perceived as a knowledgeable and open person and a possible friend, and not just as an American. As you can see, identities are fluid, not static. No one wants to be put in an ethnic, national, or gender box, especially at the beginning of a relationship.

Here is another example of how identities are constructed in verbal and nonverbal talk:

JAN: Hey, how's it goin'?

HEATHER: (Silence and a scowl)

JAN: What's the matter?

HEATHER: Nothing. Forget it.

JAN: What are you so pissed about?

HEATHER: Forget it! Just drop it.

JAN: Well, all right! Pout! I don't give a damn!

Here, even though Jan and Heather are not talking about any specific object, issue, or event, they are definitely constructing identities together. In this conversation Heather's definition of herself and of Jan goes something like this:

Right now I identify myself as independent of you (Silence. "Nothing. Forget it."). You're butting into my space, and you probably think I'm antisocial. But I've got good reasons for my anger.

On the other hand, Jan's definition of herself and of Heather is something like this:

Right now I identify myself as friendly and concerned ("Hey, how's it goin'?" "What's the matter?"). I'm willing to stick my neck out a little, but you're obviously not interested in being civil. So there's a limit to how long I'll stay friendly and concerned ("Well, all right! Pout! I don't give a damn!").

We want to emphasize that nobody in these conversations is constructing identities perfectly or poorly, right or wrong. In one sense, there is no right or wrong way to participate in this process. There are just *outcomes* of how you do it, *results* that you may or may not want.

We also want to emphasize that none of the people in these conversations could avoid constructing selves. It's a process that happens whenever people communicate. Some of the most important meanings we collaboratively construct are our identities, and all communicating involves constructing identities or selves. No matter how brief or extended the contact, whether it's written or oral, mediated or face-to-face, impersonal or interpersonal, the people involved will be directly or indirectly constructing definitions of themselves and responding to the definitions offered by others. Radio talk show hosts and television newscasters are continually building identities. The person who writes a letter longhand on colorful stationery is defining him- or herself differently from the person who writes the same letter on a word processor. The person who answers the telephone, "Yeah?" is defining him- or herself differently from the one who answers, "Good morning. May I help you?"

Research on intercultural communication shows how identity construction occurs in different cultures. For instance, Bailey (2000) shows how young Dominican Americans negotiate their cultural identities by switching between Spanish and English. Speaking in Spanish indicates solidarity with their peers who are similar in cultural background. In another study, Hegde (1998) shows how immigrants from India navigate between their Indian identity and their new American identity. Saskia has also studied Arab identities and has found that people of Arab descent enact multiple national and religious identities and feel more or less strongly Arab at various times, but

3 about any specific object,  
ntities together. In this con-  
goes something like this:

(Silence. "Nothing. Forget  
y think I'm antisocial. But

of Heather is something like

ned ("Hey, how's it goin'?"  
out a little, but you're obvi-  
to how long I'll stay friendly  
damn!").

conversations is constructing  
one sense, there is no right or  
re just *outcomes* of how you do

people in these conversations  
hat happens whenever people  
gs we collaboratively construct  
lves constructing identities or  
act, whether it's written or oral,  
sonal, the people involved will  
as of themselves and respond-  
talk show hosts and television

The person who writes a letter  
r- or herself differently from the  
ccessor. The person who answers  
elf differently from the one who

a shows how identity construc-  
nce, Bailey (2000) shows how  
cultural identities by switching  
panish indicates solidarity with  
ground. In another study, Hegde  
navigate between their Indian  
askia has also studied Arab iden-  
cent enact multiple national and  
ongly Arab at various times, but

it really depends on the context. For instance, some people say that they call themselves Arab American mostly when they have to fill out official forms, and that they feel Arab rather than Arab American when they talk about families because family is so important in the Arab world. As Scotton (1983) summarizes, in various cultural contexts, speakers use language choices "imaginatively ... a range of options is open to them within a normative framework, and ... taking one option rather than another is the *negotiation of identities*."

So two reasons why it's important to understand the process of identity construction are (1) that you're doing it whenever you communicate—and everybody else is, too—and (2) that the process affects who you are in relation to others. The third reason why it's important is that *your negotiation responses also affect where your communication is on the impersonal–interpersonal continuum*.... Some responses just about guarantee that your communication will be impersonal. Others lead to more interpersonal communicating. So if you want to help change the quality of your contacts with your dating partner, employer, roommate, sister, or parent in either direction on the continuum, you'll probably want to learn as much as you can about this process.

### Definition of Identity

Identity or self is made up of interlocking features that mark how persons behave and respond to others. Identities are constellations of labels that establish social expectations that we have of ourselves and others. These social expectations can include roles that we want or have to play in specific situations and the languages or dialects we speak and expect others to speak. When you enter a classroom in the United States, you expect your instructor to talk and behave in certain ways. For instance, most North Americans expect that a person enacting the identity of an "instructor" should normally stand in front of the class, speak in a loud and intelligible voice, have control in the classroom, and, unless it's a foreign language class, express him- or herself in some form of English. And in order to enact the role of instructor, this person needs students who enact their role. Notice how we say "enact." This is another way of emphasizing that identities are something that we *do* rather than what we *are* (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). You are not born to be a student for all of your life, but you are socialized into this identity, and it becomes salient in different times and places.

### Old versus Current Views of Identity

It may sound weird to you to say that identities or selves are co-constructed in verbal and nonverbal talk. You might think of your *self* as fairly stable, identifiable, and clearly bounded. If so, you're not alone. Most people in Western

cultures have been taught to think of their selves as individual containers that enclose their unique essence. As one book puts it,

There is an individualist mode of thought, distinctive of modern Western cultures, which, though we may criticize it in part or in whole, we cannot escape. ... This inescapable cultural vise has given us—or, at least, the dominant social groups in the West—a sense of themselves as distinctive, independent agents who own themselves and have relatively clear boundaries to protect in order to ensure their integrity and permit them to function more effectively in the world. (Sampson, 1993, 31)

Most members of dominant social groups in the Western world think of the boundary of the individual as the same as the boundary of the body, and that the body houses or contains the self. Common metaphors reflect this view, as when people say that a person is "filled with anger," "unable to contain her joy," "brimming with laughter," or "trying to get anger out of our system" (Lakoff 1987, 383). Some theories of psychology reinforce this view of identity or the self. Psychologists influenced by the famous therapist Sigmund Freud, for example, think of society as made up of individual selves who are each working out their inner tensions. One Freudian insisted that a student revolt against university administrators was caused by the students' unresolved conflicts with their fathers. In his view,

protestors were taking out their inner conflicts with parental authority by acting against the authority represented by the University. It was as though there were no legitimate problems with the University; it only symbolized protestors' unresolved Oedipal conflicts with the real source of their troubles, their fathers. (Sampson, 1993, 44)

For this psychologist, selves were individual and internal.

But in the last decades of the twentieth century, the development of space travel, satellite television, and the World Wide Web; the globalization of music and business; and the end of the Cold War all helped Westerners understand that this view of the person as a bounded individual is, as one anthropologist puts it, rather "peculiar" (Geertz, 1979, 229). For centuries, people in many cultures outside the West have not been thinking this way. For example, if a North American is asked to explain why someone financially cheated another person, the North American's tendency will be to locate the cause in "the kind of person she is." A Hindu, by contrast, is more likely to offer a social explanation—"The man is unemployed. He is not in a position to give that money" (Miller, 1984, 968). This is because many members of the Hindu culture don't think of identity or the self as individual, but as social or communal. For them, identity is a function of cultural or group memberships. Or, to take another example, in a study of U.S. and Samoan child care workers, U.S. preschool teachers tended to help children socialize by developing their individuality, whereas Samoan caregivers' efforts "were directed towards helping the children learn how better to fit into their in-group" (Ochs, 1988, 199). In their broader culture, Samoans in this study also recognized the central role

individual containers that

of modern Western cul-  
whole, we cannot escape.  
least, the dominant social  
tive, independent agents  
aries to protect in order to  
re effectively in the world.

ern world think of the bound-  
the body, and that the body  
ect this view, as when people  
tain her joy," "brimming with  
koff 1987, 383). Some theories  
self. Psychologists influenced  
e, think of society as made up  
inner tensions. One Freudian  
inistrators was caused by the  
his view,

h parental authority by act-  
rsity. It was as though there  
only symbolized protestors'  
f their troubles, their fathers.

internal.  
ury, the development of space  
Web; the globalization of music  
helped Westerners understand  
idual is, as one anthropologist  
for centuries, people in many  
ng this way. For example, if a  
ne financially cheated another  
be to locate the cause in "the  
is more likely to offer a social  
; not in a position to give that  
ny members of the Hindu cul-  
idual, but as social or commu-  
l or group memberships. Or, to  
amoan child care workers, U.S.  
cialize by developing their indi-  
"were directed towards helping  
in-group" (Ochs, 1988, 199). In  
also recognized the central role

of other people in events that were deemed worthy of praise or compliments. So one researcher reported that when a Samoan passenger complimented a driver with language that translates, "Well done the driving," the driver typically responded, "Well done the support." "In this Samoan view, if a performance went well, it is the supporters' merit as much as the performer's" (Ochs 1988, 200). Many Japanese understand the person in a similar way. In Japan, one author notes, "The concept of a self completely independent from the environment is very foreign" (Kojima, 1984, 972). Rather, Japanese think of individuals in terms of the social context they fit into—their family, work group, and so on. The United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and some other Western cultures have a strong belief in the individual self, but many European countries (e.g., Spain, Austria, and Finland) and most Asian and Latin American cultures understand identities or selves as social, relational, or group-oriented (Hofstede, 1980). (See the first reading in Chapter 11.)

It's easier to understand how identity construction works—and how to manage your own identity constructing—if you adopt what has historically been a more Eastern perspective. This doesn't mean that you have to pretend to be somebody you're not. In fact, this understanding is being accepted by communication scholars, psychologists, anthropologists, and other students of human behavior all over the world. Many of these scholars and teachers recognize that selves or identities are relational from birth, or maybe even before. They take seriously what Lev Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead, two very influential human development researchers, said several decades ago: namely, that infants are first *social* beings and only later in life learn to see themselves as *individuals*. As psychologist Edward Sampson explains,

Both Vygotsky and Mead clearly emphasize the necessary social bases of human thinking, cognition, and mindedness. Indeed, rather than viewing the individual's mind as setting forth the terms for the social order, the reverse describes the actual event: the social process—namely, dialogue and conversation—precedes, and is the foundation for, any subsequent psychological processes that emerge. (Sampson, 1993, 103)

In short, the English terms *self* and *identity* and their meanings are only about 300 years old. Studies of history and of other cultures illustrate that the Western definition developed over the last 275 of these 300 years is very narrow. Today, this idea that selves are individual containers is being revised as communication scholars and psychologists are recognizing how much our selves are developed in communication with others. Westerners increasingly recognize that identities or selves are multidimensional and that they change in response to the people and institutions we connect with. Each of our identities has athletic, artistic, ethnic, gendered, occupational, scientific, political, economic, and religious dimensions, and all of these shift in content and importance as we move from situation to situation.

## FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF IDENTITIES OR SELVES

This understanding of identities or selves can be summarized in four primary characteristics.

### 1. Identities Are Multidimensional and Changing

One feature of selves is that we're complex. On the one hand, each of us is characterized by some stabilities or patterns. A person's genetic makeup is stable, and your ethnic identity also probably hasn't changed and probably won't. Someone who's known you all your life can probably identify some features you had when you were 4 or 5 years old that you still have, and as you look at old photographs of yourself, you might recognize how the identity of the person in the picture is in some ways "the same" as who you are today.

On the other hand, you are different in at least as many ways as you are the same. Think, for example, of who you were at age 9 or 10 and who you were at age 14 or 15. Adolescence is a time of *significant* change in our selves. Or, if it fits you, think of yourself before you were married & after, or your identity before and after you had children.

Some researchers broadly classify identities or selves into personal, relational, and communal features (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). *Personal* identity is all the characteristics that you think make you a unique person, such as being friendly, helpful, disciplined, hard working, beautiful, and so forth. *Relational* identities are based on relationships you have with others, such as mother-daughter, teacher-student, or employer-employee. *Communal* identities are usually related to larger groups, such as ethnicities, race, religion, gender, or nationality.

### 2. Selves Are Responders

This point was made in Chapter 2 when we said that responsiveness is one of the five features that makes each of us a person. The main point there was to contrast responding with simply reacting. Now we want to build the meaning of this idea by noting that responding implies both *choice* (not just reacting) and *connection* with what's already happened.

To say that selves are responders is to say that we grow out of and fit into a context of actions and events that we behave-in-relation-to. On the one hand, this is just another way of saying that selves are relational or social. Remember how Alia responded to Cheryl's question about where she is from and how they both constructed their student and ethnic/national identities? They responded to each other. In one instance, Cheryl might be regarded as just reacting when she asks about Alia's absent scarf. However, in most instances, both women are responding to each other, which includes reflecting about what the other person just said. Responding means that all human action is joint action. No

f Interpersonal Communication

## IES OR SELVES

marized in four primary

ing

ie one hand, each of us is  
erson's genetic makeup is  
n't changed and probably  
in probably identify some  
that you still have, and as  
ht recognize how the iden-  
"the same" as who you are

as many ways as you are the  
) or 10 and who you were at  
nge in our selves. Or, if it fits  
after, or your identity before

or selves into personal, re-  
, & Ribeau, 2003). *Personal*  
make you a unique person,  
l working, beautiful, and so  
ships you have with others,  
mployer-employee. *Communal*  
h as ethnicities, race, religion,

l that responsiveness is one of  
. The main point there was to  
we want to build the meaning  
th choice (not just reacting) and

hat we grow out of and fit into  
n-relation-to. On the one hand,  
: relational or social. Remember  
where she is from and how they  
onal identities? They responded  
regarded as just reacting when  
in most instances, both women  
reflecting about what the other  
human action is joint action. No

human starts behaving from ground zero, so that everything we do, from the very beginning, is in reply or answer to something else.

Humans begin responding from the first moment we develop any awareness, which, as we noted earlier, probably happens before birth. Every baby is born into a world of verbal and nonverbal talk, family relationships, gender patterns, ongoing activities, and social and political events. This is the sense in which no person is, "after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe." Since none of us is Adam or Eve, all of our actions more or less effectively connect with or fit into the activities and language systems that surround us (Bakhtin, 1986, 69).

### 3. Identities Are Developed in Past and Present Relationships

The reason selves change over time is that we develop who we are in relationships with the people around us. Some of the most important parts of each person's identity are established in one's family of origin, the people with whom you spend the first five to seven years of your life. One of your parents may have consistently introduced you to new people from the time you were old enough to talk, and today you may still find it easy to make acquaintances. Or you may have moved around a lot when you were young, and today you feel secure only when you have your own "place" and you prefer to spend holidays close to home. You may treasure a wonderful relationship with your dad, or you may have had the opposite kind of experience. Your family is the role model for many types of relational, religious, or ethnic identities. For instance, you learn what it means to be a good friend or a good neighbor, a good brother or sister or mother or father, or perhaps not such a good one:

My father is an alcoholic. He has never admitted to that fact. He and my mom used to get in lots of fights when I lived at home. The six of us kids were used as pawns in their war games. I always wondered whether or not I was responsible for his drinking. When the fights were going on, I always retreated to my room. There I felt secure. Now, I am 22, and have been married for two years. I have this affliction that, whenever the slightest thing happens, I always say I am so sorry. I am sorry when the milk is not cold, sorry that the wet towel was left in the gym bag. I just want to take the blame for everything, even things I have no control over. (Black, 1982, 9)

Many current studies about dysfunctional families emphasize how people with addictions developed the communication patterns that reinforce these addictions in their families of origin (Fuller et al., 2003). Other research focuses on how addictions affect the children or other family members of addicted persons. One review of studies about adult children of alcoholics concludes that, regardless of gender, socioeconomic group, or ethnic identity, these people develop 13 common features. For example, many adult children of alcoholics "have difficulty following a project through from beginning to end," "lie when it

would be just as easy to tell the truth," "judge themselves without mercy," "take themselves very seriously," "constantly seek approval and affirmation," and "are extremely loyal, even in the face of evidence that the loyalty is undeserved" (Beatty, 1989). These books and articles illustrate how much our family of origin contributes to the response patterns that we follow in identity construction. . . . Past relationships contribute a great deal to the patterns that help make up our present selves.

Present relationships are also important. When you realize that a new friend really likes you, it can do great things for your self-definition. Getting a top grade from a teacher you respect can affect how you see yourself. At work, a positive performance evaluation from your supervisor or a raise can improve not only your mood and your bank account but also your perception of yourself. And again, the reverse can obviously also happen. The point is, genetic makeup does not determine your identity, and we call the communication process that produces these identities *identity construction*.

#### 4. Identities Can Be Avowed and Ascribed

Finally, identities or selves can be ascribed and avowed. *Ascribed* means that others assign you an identity that you may or may not agree with; *avowed* means that you personally assign yourself an identity and act it out. People also try to negotiate this avowal and ascription process. Remember the conversation between Cheryl and Alia? Cheryl ascribed to Alia a somewhat stereotyped national and religious identity that Alia did not accept as her main identity in that particular situation. During the conversation they both put their student and cultural identities on the table (being from Detroit and growing up in Oregon can imply two different regional identities) and reached somewhat of an alignment on how they wanted to be perceived in this initial encounter. However, sometimes when people stereotype, they rigidly stick with their opinions about people and make them one dimensional. For instance, sometimes people talk slower when they realize that English is Saskia's second language or start immediately to talk about beer when they hear that Saskia is from Germany. It can be entertaining for a while, but then Saskia wants to be perceived as Saskia or a woman or an instructor and not only as German. Rigid ascription of identities can become a problem for the person who is ascribed the identity. This is also true for many African Americans, Latinas, or Asian Americans. People are often judged on their looks and language and not who else they are or want to be. The question of ascription and avowal will come up again when we talk about response options.

#### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Fill in the blank: "\_\_\_\_\_ appear and are constructed or worked out in verbal and nonverbal talk."
2. Identify three plausible features of the identity being offered by the person who answers the telephone with a loud "Yeah?" What are three plausible

# Self and Identity: Transacting a Self in Interactions with Others

Steve Duck and David T. McMahan

Steve Duck and David McMahan are communication teacher-scholars connected with the University of Iowa. Steve is a distinguished research professor and David is an award-winning teacher and consultant.

This excerpt from their interpersonal communication text begins with the important point that each of us develops our individual identity as we communicate with the people around us and encounter "powerful forces of society" such as the frown of a parent or teacher, praise from a mentor, or a bonus for doing an especially good job. The "point of this reading," they write, is that "you *do* your identity in front of audiences, and they might evaluate and comment on whether you're doing it right." This is what makes identity management such an important part of interpersonal communication.

The essay also notes that your portrayal of yourself is not entirely a matter of your own choosing; it is shaped by the social needs at the time, the social situation, the social frame, and the circumstances surrounding your performance. Your identity connects to other identities and the social situation, and it has to "make sense," somehow, in relation to them.

The essay discusses embarrassment and social predicaments in order to show how these external pressures can affect how people perform their identities. They explain how each of us works to become "an accountable self," an individual who is evaluated by others as more or less competent, moral, and likeable. They emphasize that this identity-construction process happens in everyday practices, not just special events. Greeting rituals, rules for asking questions and apologizing, norms for eye contact and touch, forms of address, and other subtle verbal and nonverbal choices all help constitute and reflect individual identities.

## MAIN IDEAS

- Self or identity is a social, not an individual construction; it's not that we "are" a specific person but that we "do" our identity with others.
- Your identity choices are important, *and* you are also molded by social pressures.
- Selves are constructed or transacted in everyday practices, not just special events.
- People continually evaluate each other's identity moves to determine their moral accountability.

**I**n keeping with this book's theme, you can't have a self without also having relationships with other people—both the personal relationships you choose and the social relationships you reject. More than that, it's impossible for a person to have a concept of self unless he or she can reflect on identity via the

From *The Basics of Communication: A Relational Perspective*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009, pp. 134–140. Reprinted with permission.

views of these other people with whom he or she has social or personal relationships. Your identity is *transacted* or constituted in part from two things: First, you take into yourself—or are reinforced for taking into yourself—the beliefs and prevailing norms of the society in which you live. Second, you are *held to account* for the identity that you project by those people you hang out with. The gang member would have lost status in the gang if he had not shot his target. As a Indiana University fan, you lose face if you don't know the score during your game with Purdue or cannot name your own team's quarterback. As a student, you are expected to know answers about the book you are reading for your class.

Let us rephrase this point: Because individuals acquire individuality through the social practices in which they exist and carry out their lives, they encounter powerful forces of society that are actually enforced on the ground by society's secret agents, their relationships with other people that affect their identities. (That "raised eyebrow" from your neighbor/instructor/team fan was actually society at work!) Your "self" is structured and enacted in relation to those people who have power over you in formal ways, like the police, but most often you encounter the institutions within a society through its secret agents: public opinion and the people you know who express opinions about moral issues of the day and give you their judgments. You, too, are one of society's secret agents, guiding what other people do and thinking just as they do....

It is important to note how the routine banality of everyday-life talk with friends who share the same values and talk about them day by day actually does something for society and helps make you who you are. Such routines reinforce people's perspectives and put events in the same sorts of predictable and routine frameworks of meaning through trivial and pedestrian communication with one another in everyday life (Wood & Duck, 2006). But—here's the point of this section, so remember it well—you *do* your identity in front of the audiences, and they might evaluate and comment on whether you're doing it right. Although we used the extreme case about the gang member as an attention grabber, the same kinds of processes are going on in interaction when you profess your undying allegiance to one football team and your supposed hatred of the opposing team. The people around you do not resent it but actually encourage you and reinforce your expression of that identity. They share it and support it. Just as the gang member accepted his identity with all its disturbing implications, so do you when you categorize the opposing team as some kind of enemy. The underlying idea—that a group of people can be treated as nothing more than depersonalized, dehumanized others—runs through team loyalty and rivalry, town versus college kids, and any other kind of stereotyping.

### PERFORMATIVE SELF

So now that you know the importance of other people in influencing who you are, you are ready to move on to look more closely at the curious idea that you don't just *have* an identity; you actually *do* one. Part of an identity is not just *hav-*

ing a  
it we  
com  
in a j  
peop  
be se  
the p  
pers  
perf  
a wa

the  
was  
and  
(Cup  
conc  
esse  
the i  
look  
Mea  
inter

the  
perf  
Rob  
man  
calle  
gion  
sion  
in th  
migl  
(say,  
mak  
mea  
free  
you

self  
iden  
you  
stud  
that  
drav  
If y  
stea

he has social or personal  
 ed in part from two things:  
 king into yourself—the be-  
 u live. Second, you are *held*  
 ple you hang out with. The  
 e had not shot his target. As  
 know the score during your  
 s quarterback. As a student,  
 u are reading for your class.  
 require individuality through  
 it their lives, they encounter  
 d on the ground by society's  
 e that affect their identities.  
 uctor/team fan was actually  
 ed in relation to those people  
 ie police, but most often you  
 its secret agents: public opin-  
 ons about moral issues of the  
 one of society's secret agents,  
 s they do....

ity of everyday-life talk with  
 ut them day by day actually  
 i who you are. Such routines  
 i the same sorts of predictable  
 rial and pedestrian communi-  
 & Duck, 2006). But—here's the  
 lo your identity in front of the  
 nt on whether you're doing it  
 the gang member as an atten-  
 ing on in interaction when you  
 l team and your supposed ha-  
 ou do not resent it but actually  
 that identity. They share it and  
 s identity with all its disturbing  
 re opposing team as some kind  
 f people can be treated as noth-  
 others—runs through team loy-  
 any other kind of stereotyping.

## SELF

r people in influencing who you  
 esely at the curious idea that you  
 Part of an identity is not just *hab-*

ing a symbolic sense of it but doing it in the presence of other people and doing it well in their eyes. This is an extremely interesting and provocative fact about communication: Everyone *does* his or her identity for an audience, like an actor in a play. Facework is part of what happens in everyday-life communication and people have a sense of their own dignity and image—the person they want to be seen as. That is part of what gets transacted in everyday communication by the person and by others in the interaction who politely protect and preserve the person's "face." We can now restate this idea for the present chapter as being the performance of one's identity in public, the presentation of the self to people in a way that is intended to make the self look good.

Erving Goffman (1959) dealt with this particular problem and indicated the way in which momentary social forces affect identity portrayal. Goffman was particularly interested in how identity is performed in everyday life and how people manage their image in a way that makes them "look good" (Cupach & Metts, 1994). You will already have worked out for yourself that the concept of "looking good" means "looking good to *other people*." It is therefore essentially a relational concept, but it takes you one step closer to looking at the interpersonal interaction that occurs on the ground every day. Rather than looking at society in the generalized and abstract way that George Herbert Mead did, Goffman focused on what you actually do in conversations and interactions.

...., Your portrayal of yourself is shaped by the social needs at the time, the social situation, the social frame, and the circumstances surrounding your performance. The server does not introduce herself .... to her friends ("Hi, I'm Roberta, and I'll be your server tonight ....") except as a joke, so her performance of the server identity is restricted to those times and places where it is called for and appropriate. Goffman differentiated a front region and back region to social performance: The front region/front stage is where your professional, proper self is performed. For example, a server is all smiles and civility in the front stage of the restaurant when talking to customers. This behavior might be different from how he or she performs in the back region/backstage (say, the restaurant kitchen) when talking with the cooks or other servers and making jokes about the customers or about being disrespectful to them. That means the performance of your identity is not sprung into action by your own free wishes but by social cues that this is the right place and time to perform your "self" in that way.

An identity is a person making sense of the world not just for him- or herself but in a way that makes sense within a context provided by others. Any identity connects to other identities. You can be friendly when you are with your friends, but you are expected to be professional when on the job and to do student identity when in class. An individual inevitably draws on knowledge that is shared in any community to which he or she belongs, so any person draws on information and knowledge that are both personal and communal. If you change from thinking of identity as about "self as character" and instead see it as "self as performer," you also must consider the importance of

linguistic competence in social performance, and that includes not doing or saying embarrassing or foolish things.

## EMBARRASSMENT AND PREDICAMENTS

Embarrassment is one of the big problems of social life and involves you actually performing a behavior that is inconsistent with the identity or face that you want to present. Cupach and Metts (1994; Metts, 2000) have done a large amount of research on this topic. Someone who wants to impress an interviewer but instead spills coffee on her lap will be embarrassed because her "face" of professional competence is undercut by clumsiness; someone who wants to present a "face" of being cool but who suddenly blushes or twitches will probably feel embarrassed because the nonverbal behavior contradicts the identity of being cool. In both cases, the actual performance of an identity (face) is undercut by a specific behavior that just does not fit that presentation of face.

People can be embarrassed by acts that undercut their **performative self**, the doing of the identity that they have claimed for themselves (such as professional competence), momentarily like this, or they can get into longer-term **predicaments** that present a greater challenge to the performative self. Think of predicaments as extended embarrassment. If you go to a job interview and your very first answer makes you look stupid, you know you are still going to have to carry on through the interview anyway, with the interviewers all thinking you are a hopeless, worthless, and unhireable idiot. You'd rather jump into a vat of boiling sulfur right now, but you cannot; you have to sit it out watching their polite smiles and feeling terrible.

Predicaments, like standing up to give a speech and realizing you brought only Page 1 of your 10 pages of notes can be a real test of character (it was for one of us authors, anyway), but predicaments test the performative self and challenge the person to live up to the claims presented in the symbolic identity that the face set up. Of course, predicaments are modified by relationships. As people become closer and more intimate, they are allowed to breach the presentation of one another's face to a greater degree than strangers may do (Metts, 2000). Part of knowing someone well is that you can cross the normal social, physical, or psychological boundaries that exist for everyone else who does not know him or her so well.

Mock put-downs are quite a common form of intimate banter in English-speaking countries but not in Eastern cultures, which suggests that the notion of face and identity is a culturally influenced one on top of everything else that influences it. However, the idea that people work together in relationships to uphold one another's face through politeness is an important one, called **teamwork** by Goffman (1971). Direct challenges to another person's competence ("You are a failure!") an openly offensive in most circumstances, although, the more intimate the relationship is, they are tolerated to a greater

## CAMENTS

life and involves you actually the identity or face that you have done a large amount to impress an interviewer but because her "face" of professional person who wants to present a twitches will probably feel contradicts the identity of being a person (face) is undercut by a situation of face.

to cut their performative self, for themselves (such as professional) they can get into longer-term the performative self. Think of going to a job interview and your view you are still going to have to interviewers all thinking you would rather jump into a vat of glue to sit it out watching their

each and realizing you brought a real test of character (it was for test the performative self and presented in the symbolic identity modified by relationships. As we are allowed to breach the presence than strangers may do (Metts, you can cross the normal social, for everyone else who does not

of intimate banter in English, which suggests that the notion of one on top of everything else people work together in relationship politeness is an important one, challenges to another person's offensiveness in most circumstances, is, they are tolerated to a greater

degree. Friends are permitted a great deal more latitude in making such comments than strangers are, and less offense is taken when a friend says such a thing than would be taken if a stranger or relatively distant and unknown colleague at work said it. Bosses may say it directly to an inferior because they have social power to break normal social rules, but it can still hurt. A worker who said it to a boss would be seen quite unambiguously as stepping outside the proper relational and hierarchical boundaries. This very fact makes a point that both context and relationships serve to define the sorts of communication about identity that are accepted, and vice versa. Except in live standup comedy shows where audience members attend expecting to see someone (preferably someone else) humiliated, the open attack on someone's identity management is a relational communication with great power and shock value.

## SELF CONSTITUTED/TRANSACTIONAL IN EVERYDAY PRACTICES

Although this chapter has been about personal identity, we have seen that identity is molded by the ways in which the surrounding culture influences its expression, the way that you *do* your identity and are recognized as having one. Once you recognize that your identity is not just an internal structure but also a practical performance, the relevant communication involved in "being yourself" is affected by the social norms that are in place to guide behavior in a given society. People judge your identity performance and expect you to know about the same practical world and explain or account for yourself. . . .

An important element of doing an identity in front of an audience is that you become an **accountable self**, which essentially allows your identity to be morally judged by other people. What you do can be assessed by other people as right or wrong according to existing habits of society. Any practical way of performing identity turns identity itself into a moral action—that is, identity as a way of living based on choices made about actions that a person sees as available or relevant but that others will judge and hold to account. This point moves the discussion about social construction of identity on from interaction with other people through the force of society and its value systems. Society as a whole encourages you to take certain actions (do not park next to fire hydrants, protect the elderly and the weak, be a good neighbor, recycle!).

**Moral accountability**... is a fancy way of saying that society as a whole makes judgments about your actions and choices and then holds you to account for the actions and choices that you make, but it also forcefully encourages you to act in particular ways and to see specific types of identity as "good" (patriot is good, traitor is bad; loyalty is good, thief is bad; open self-disclosure is good, passive aggression is bad, for example).

The identity that you thought of as your own personality, then, is not made up of your own desires and impulses but is formed, performed, and expressed within a set of social patterns and judgments built up by values and practices a community or culture through the relationships that people have with one another in it...

For all of these reasons, it makes sense to see a person's identity as a complex and compound concept that is partly based on history, memory, experiences, and interpretations by the individual, partly evoked by momentary aspects of talk (its context, the people you are with, your stage in life, your goals at the time), and partly a social creation directed by other people, society and its categories, and your relationship needs and objectives in those contexts. Your performance of the self is guided by your relationships with other people, as well as your social goals. Even your embodiment of this knowledge or your sense of self is shaped by your social practices with other people and your sense of their valuing your physical being. Your self-consciousness in their presence and the ways you deal with it also influence the presentation of yourself to other people. Although a sense of self/identity is experienced on the ground in your practical interactions with other people, you get trapped by language into reporting it abstractly as some sort of disembodied "identity," a *symbolic* representation of the little practices and styles of behavior that you actually experience in your daily interactions with other people. Once again, then, another apparently simple idea (identity, personality, self) runs into the relational influences that make the basics of communication so valuable to study.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain what it means to say that you "do" your identity.
2. What's "facework"?
3. Explain Goffman's distinction between "front region" and "back region."
4. Extend the notion of "performative self" to define "performative contradiction."

### PROBES

1. If identity is a social construction, what happens to individual integrity? How can you be true to yourself if "who you are" is socially determined or influenced?
2. Evaluate the claim that "everyday" practices are more important than special or unique events. Doesn't performance in a major event—a big game, important speech, or major project—affect identity more than subtle eye behavior or how someone greets you?

The authors end with three "things to accept about yourself": that you will inevitably make mistakes, that your intentions are complex, and that you have contributed to the problem. Each of these helps you to cope with the identity issues that will arise, especially in difficult conversations.

### MAIN IDEAS

- Identity issues can be terrifying, even for mature professionals.
- Identity issues revolve around three core issues: competence, being a good person, and being worthy of love.
- Although there is no quick fix to identity threats, it helps to avoid denial and exaggeration.
- One way to ground your identity is to become aware of your own identity issues; another is to complexify your identity.
- It's also important to remember that you will make mistakes, your intentions are complex, and you have contributed to the problem.

I've already accepted a job elsewhere, and all that's left for me to do is tell my boss I'm leaving. I don't need any references or future business, and no one can influence my decision. And still, when I think of telling my boss, I'm *terrified*.

—Ben, software company vice president

Viewed from the outside, Ben would seem to have nothing to fear; he holds all the cards. Even so, Ben isn't getting any sleep. He explains: "My father worked for one company his whole life, and I always admired his loyalty. In my own life, I've tried to do the right thing, and for me a big part of that is sticking by the people around me—my parents, my wife, my children, and my colleagues. Telling my boss I'm leaving raises this loyalty issue directly. My boss was also my mentor, and has been very supportive. The whole thing is making me wonder: Am I really the loyal soldier I like to think I am, or just another greedy jerk willing to betray someone for the right price?"

### DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS THREATEN OUR IDENTITY

Ben's predicament highlights a crucial aspect of why some conversations can be so overwhelmingly difficult. Our anxiety results not just from having to face the other person, but from having to face *ourselves*. The conversation has the potential to disrupt our sense of who we are in the world, or to highlight what we hope we are but fear we are not. The conversation poses a threat to our identity—the story we tell ourselves about ourselves—and having our identity threatened can be profoundly disturbing.

From *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. New York: Penguin Books, 1999, 111–121.

self": that you will inevitably  
you have contributed to the  
sues that will arise, especially

ionals.  
ence, being a good person, and  
it helps to avoid denial and  
e of your own identity issues;  
es, your intentions are complex,

left for me to do is tell my  
re business, and no one can  
ling my boss, I'm terrified.  
are company vice president

to have nothing to fear; he  
ig any sleep.  
e company his whole life, and  
ried to do the right thing, and  
around me—my parents, my  
boss I'm leaving raises this loy-  
and has been very supportive.  
the loyal soldier I like to think  
someone for the right price?"

## IS THREATEN

if why some conversations can  
esults not just from having to  
ourselves. The conversation has  
re in the world, or to highlight  
nversation poses a threat to our  
selves—and having our identity

lost by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and

## Three Core Identities

There are probably as many identities as there are people. But three identity issues seem particularly common, and often underlie what concerns us most during difficult conversations: Am I competent? Am I a good person? Am I worthy of love?

- **Am I Competent?** "I agonized about whether to bring up the subject of my salary. Spurred on by my colleagues, I finally did. Before I could even get started, my supervisor said, 'I'm surprised you want to discuss this. The truth is, I've been disappointed by your performance this year.' I felt nauseous. Maybe I'm not the talented chemist I thought I was."
- **Am I a Good Person?** "I had intended to break up with Sandra that night. I began in a roundabout way, and as soon as she got the drift, she started to cry. It hurt me so much to see her in such pain. The hardest thing for me in life is hurting people I care about; it goes against who I am spiritually and emotionally. I just couldn't bear how I was feeling, and after a few moments I was telling her how much I loved her and that everything would work out between us."
- **Am I Worthy of Love?** "I began a conversation with my brother about the way he treats his wife. He talks down to her and I know it really bothers her. I was hugely nervous bringing it up, and my words were getting all twisted. Then he shouted, 'Who are you to tell me how to act?! You've never had a real relationship in your whole life!'. After that, I could hardly breathe, let alone talk. All I could think about was how I wanted to get out of there."

Suddenly, who we thought we were when we walked into the conversation is called into question.

## An Identity Quake Can Knock Us Off Balance

Internally, our Identity Conversation is in full swing: "Maybe I am mediocre," "How can I be the kind of person who causes others pain?" or "My brother's right. No woman has ever loved me." In each case, it is what this conversation seems to be saying about us that rips the ground from beneath our feet.

Getting knocked off balance can even cause you to react physically in ways that make the conversation go from difficult to impossible. Images of yourself or of the future are hardwired to your adrenal response, and shaking them up can cause an unmanageable rush of anxiety or anger, or an intense desire to get away. Well-being is replaced with depression, hope with hopelessness, efficacy with fear. And all the while you're trying to engage in the extremely delicate task of communicating clearly and effectively. Your supervisor is explaining why you're not being promoted; you're busy having your own private identity quake.

## There's No Quick Fix

You can't "quake-proof" your sense of self. Grappling with identity issues is what life and growth are all about, and no amount of love or accomplishment or

skill can insulate you from these challenges. Seeing your husband cry when you tell him you don't want to have another child, or hearing your coach say "Grow up" when you raise the issue of discriminatory treatment on the team, will test your sense of who you are in these relationships and in the world.

Not all identity challenges are earthshaking, but some will be. A difficult conversation can cause you to relinquish a cherished aspect of how you see yourself. At its most profound, this can be a loss that requires mourning just as surely as the death of a loved one. There's no use pretending there's a quick fix, or that you will never again lose your balance, or that life's toughest challenges can be overcome by mastering a few easy steps.

But there is some good news. You can improve your ability to recognize and cope with identity issues when they hit. Thinking clearly and honestly about who you are can help reduce your anxiety level during the conversation and significantly strengthen your foundation in its aftermath.

### VULNERABLE IDENTITIES: THE ALL-OR-NOTHING SYNDROME

Getting better at managing the Identity Conversation starts with understanding the ways in which we make ourselves vulnerable to being knocked off balance. The biggest factor that contributes to a vulnerable identity is "all-or-nothing" thinking: I'm either competent or incompetent, good or evil, worthy of love or not.

The primary peril of all-or-nothing thinking is that it leaves our identity extremely unstable, making us hypersensitive to feedback. When faced with negative information about ourselves, all-or-nothing thinking gives us only two choices for how to manage that information, both of which cause serious problems. Either we try to deny the information that is inconsistent with our self-image, or we do the opposite: we take in the information in a way that exaggerates its importance to a crippling degree. All-or-nothing identities are about as sturdy as a two-legged stool.

#### Denial

Clinging to a purely positive identity leaves no place in our self-concept for negative feedback. If I think of myself as a super-competent person who never makes mistakes, then feedback suggesting that I have made a mistake presents a problem. The only way to keep my identity intact is to deny the feedback—to figure out why it's not really true, why it doesn't really matter, or why what I did wasn't actually a mistake.

Recall the chemist who asked for a raise. Her boss responded by saying, "I'm surprised you want to discuss this. The truth is, I've been disappointed by your performance this year." The chemist must now decide how to internalize this information, and what this says about her identity. The denial response might sound like this: "My boss knows business, but not chemistry. He doesn't

of Interpersonal Communication

our husband cry when you ring your coach say "Grow tment on the team, will test d in the world.

ut some will be. A difficult hed aspect of how you see at requires mourning just as retending there's a quick fix, at life's toughest challenges

your ability to recognize and g clearly and honestly about during the conversation and ermath.

## ITIES: YNDROME

tion starts with understanding e to being knocked off balance. ble identity is "all-or-nothing" od or evil, worthy of love or not. g is that it leaves our identity to feedback. When faced with nothing thinking gives us only on, both of which cause serious on that is inconsistent with our e information in a way that exag- ll-or-nothing identities are about

; no place in our self-concept for per-competent person who never at I have made a mistake presents intact is to deny the feedback—to esn't really matter, or why what I

se. Her boss responded by saying, : truth is, I've been disappointed by ust now decide how to internalize t her identity. The denial response iness, but not chemistry. He doesn't

understand how important my contributions have been. I wish I had a boss who could appreciate just how good I am."

Working to keep negative information out during a difficult conversation is like trying to swim without getting wet. If we're going to engage in difficult conversations, or in life for that matter, we're going to come up against information about ourselves that we find unpleasant. Denial requires a huge amount of psychic energy, and sooner or later the story we're telling ourselves is going to become untenable. *And the bigger the gap between what we hope is true and what we fear is true, the easier it is for us to lose our balance.*

## Exaggeration

The alternative to denial is exaggeration. In all-or-nothing thinking, taking in negative feedback requires us not just to adjust our self-image, but to *flip it*. If I'm not completely competent, then I'm completely incompetent: "Maybe I'm not as creative and special as I thought I was. I'll probably never amount to anything. Maybe I'll even get fired."

**We Let Their Feedback Define Who We Are.** When we exaggerate, we act as if the other person's feedback is the *only* information we have about ourselves. We put everything up for grabs, and let what they say dictate how we see ourselves. We may turn in a hundred memos on time, but if we are criticized for being late with the 101st memo, we think to ourselves, "I can never do *anything* right." This one piece of information fills our whole identity screen.

This example may seem ridiculous, but we all think like this on occasion, and not only around dramatic or traumatic events. If the waitress gives you a funny look as she collects her tip, you're cheap. If you don't help your friends paint their house, you're selfish. If your brother says you don't visit his children enough, you're an uncaring aunt. It's easy to see why exaggeration is such a debilitating reaction.

## GROUND YOUR IDENTITY

Improving your ability to manage the Identity Conversation has two steps. First, you need to become familiar with those identity issues that are important to you, so you can spot them during a conversation. Second, you need to learn to integrate new information into your identity in ways that are healthy—a step that requires you to let go of all-or-nothing thinking.

### Step One: Become Aware of Your Identity Issues

Often during a difficult conversation we are not even aware that our identity is implicated. We know we feel anxious, fearful, or tentative, and that our ability to communicate skillfully has deserted us. Usually articulate, we stumble and

stammer; usually empathetic, we can't stop interrupting and arguing; usually calm, we boil over with anger. But we aren't sure why. The connection to our identity is not obvious. It's easy to think, "I'm talking with my brother about how he treats his wife. What does this have to do with my identity?"

What triggers an identity quake for you may not trigger one in someone else. We each have our own particular sensitivities. To become more familiar with yours, observe whether there are patterns to what tends to knock you off balance during difficult conversations, and then ask yourself why. What about your identity feels at risk? What does this mean to you? How would it feel if what you fear were true?

It may take some digging. Consider Jimmy's story. Growing up, Jimmy developed a reputation for being emotionally distant. This posture helped protect him from all the emotional shrapnel he was exposed to in his home life. Everyone else might be quick to fly off the handle, but not Jimmy. He'd be rational to a fault.

But after years on his own, Jimmy changed. He began to see the value of acknowledging and sharing his emotions, and doing so with friends and colleagues added to the richness of his life. He wanted to reveal this change to his family, but was afraid. The patterns of who he was with them were deeply etched and, though far from perfect, were comfortable and predictable. His detachment had costs, but they were familiar costs.

He discussed his fear with a friend, who asked Jimmy some hard questions: "What are you really afraid of? What's the downside?" Jimmy's first response was that he was acting out of obligation to his family: "Someone in my family has to be the rational one. Otherwise, it will be chaos. The way things are now, everything more or less works."

All true, but Jimmy continued to consider his friend's questions and pushed himself for deeper answers. Eventually he discovered the fear that at some level he knew was there all along: "What if they reject me? What if they laugh? What if they think, 'What's gotten into him?'" Jimmy knew he'd be in for a serious identity shake-up if his parents responded badly, and he wasn't sure he wanted to risk it.

Jimmy's increased awareness of his identity concerns wasn't the end of the story. He determined he would show greater emotion around his family, and at first, the going was not smooth. There were awkward moments, and some members of his family wondered why he was acting differently. But Jimmy persisted, and in time a more genuine set of relationships replaced the old ones.

### Step Two: Complexify Your Identity (Adopt the And Stance)

Once you've identified which aspects of your identity are most important to you or seem most vulnerable, you can begin to complexify your self-image. This means moving away from the false choice between "I am perfect" and "I am worthless," and trying to get as clear a picture as you can about what is actually true about you. As for everyone, what is true about you is going to be a mix of good and bad behavior, noble and less noble intentions, and wise and unwise choices you've made along the way.

ting and arguing; usually hy. The connection to our ag with my brother about th my identity?"

ot trigger one in someone . To become more familiar that tends to knock you off yourself why. What about you? How would it feel if

ry. Growing up, Jimmy de- This posture helped protect to in his home life. Everyone ay. He'd be rational to a fault. He began to see the value of ing so with friends and col- ted to reveal this change to was with them were deeply able and predictable. His de-

l Jimmy some hard questions: side?" Jimmy's first response mily: "Someone in my family aaos. The way things are now,

friend's questions and pushed ered the fear that at some level me? What if they laugh? What knew he'd be in for a serious , and he wasn't sure he wanted

concerns wasn't the end of the notion around his family, and at ward moments, and some mem- differently. But Jimmy persisted, replaced the old ones.

### opt the And Stance)

r identity are most important to complexify your self-image. This between "I am perfect" and "I am as you can about what is actually about you is going to be a mix of intentions, and wise and unwise

For even the best and worst among us, all-or-nothing identities oversimplify the world. "I'm always there for my children." "When it comes to dating, I just have bad judgment." "I'm always a good listener." No one is *always* anything. We each exhibit a constellation of qualities, positive and negative, and constantly grapple with how to respond to the complicated situations life presents. And we don't always respond as competently or compassionately as we'd like.

Ben's fear of telling his boss that he has accepted another job is a good example of this. Is Ben loyal or is he a sellout? Both of those are simplifying labels that can't capture the complexity of the endless interactions Ben has had with the many people in his life. He has made many sacrifices for his family and many for his boss. He has worked weekends, turned down other job offers, worked hard to help the company recruit top talent. The list of things Ben has done that indicate loyalty is long indeed.

And, Ben is leaving his job for higher paying work elsewhere. It's reasonable for his boss to feel abandoned. That doesn't mean Ben is a bad person. It doesn't mean Ben has made a choice based on greed. He wants to put his children through college; he has been undercompensated for years and not complained.

What, then, is the bottom line on Ben? The bottom line is that there is no bottom line. Ben can feel good about many of his actions and choices, and ambivalent or regretful about others. Life is too complex for any reasonable person to feel otherwise. Indeed, a self-image that allows for complexity is healthy and robust; it provides a sturdy foundation on which to stand.

### Three Things to Accept About Yourself

No doubt, there are some aspects of who you are that you will struggle with for a lifetime. When you look inside, you won't always like what you see, and you'll find that accepting those parts of yourself takes serious work. But as you move away from an all-or-nothing identity and toward a more complex view of who you are, you'll notice that it is easier to accept certain parts of yourself that have given you trouble in the past.

There are three characteristics that are particularly important to be able to accept about yourself in difficult conversations. The more easily you can admit to your own mistakes, your own mixed intentions, and your own contributions to the problem, the more balanced you will feel during the conversation, and the higher the chances it will go well.

**1. You Will Make Mistakes.** If you can't admit to yourself that you sometimes make mistakes, you'll find it more difficult to understand and accept the legitimate aspects of the other person's story about what is going on.

Consider what happened between Rita and Isaiah. "It's important to me to be trustworthy—someone friends can really talk to," Rita explains. "That's part of being a good friend. Isaiah, one of my co-workers, confided in me that he was struggling with alcoholism, and I promised to keep it confidential. But I knew that a mutual friend had faced many of the same issues in the past, and so I talked with her about Isaiah's problem, to get some advice.

"Then Isaiah found out, and he was really furious. At first, I kept trying to explain that I was trying to help, and that my friend could be a valuable resource. Eventually I realized that the reason I was arguing was that I couldn't admit to myself that I had violated his trust, plain and simple. I didn't live up to my word. Once I was able to admit to myself that I made a mistake, Isaiah and I began to get somewhere in our conversation."

When you hold yourself to an all-or-nothing standard, even a small mistake can seem catastrophic and almost impossible to admit. If you are busy trying to shore up your "no mistakes, no failures" identity, you won't be able to engage in a meaningful learning conversation. And if you can't do that, you are likely to make the same mistakes again.

One reason people are reluctant to admit mistakes is that they fear being seen as weak or incompetent. Yet often, generally competent people who take the possibility of mistakes in stride are seen as confident, secure, and "big enough" not to have to be perfect, whereas those who resist acknowledging even the possibility of a mistake are seen as insecure and *lacking* confidence. No one is fooled.

**2. Your Intentions Are Complex.** Sometimes we get nervous about upcoming conversations because we know that our past behavior was not always motivated by good intentions.

Consider the situation that Sally and her boyfriend, Evan, find themselves in. Sally wants to break up with Evan, but is afraid that he will accuse her of just using him to get through a lonely period. Before Sally claims that her intentions were purely positive, she should think honestly about whether they actually were. Although in the big picture Sally didn't want to hurt Evan and wasn't acting maliciously, there was at least a bit of selfishness in Sally's behavior.

By being honest with herself about the complexity of her motivations, Sally has a better chance of staying on her feet if the accusation of having bad intentions arises. And she can respond in a way that is genuine: "As I think about it, some of what you're saying makes sense. I *was* lonely, and being with you helped. I don't think that was my only reason for wanting to be with you. I did hope it would work out. There are lots of pieces to what was going on for me."

**3. You Have Contributed to the Problem.** A third crucial step for grounding yourself involves assessing and taking responsibility for what you've contributed to the problem.

This is not always easy to do. Walker recently learned that his daughter Annie Mae is struggling with an eating disorder. Her college advisor called, letting Walker know that Anne Mae had checked herself into the university health clinic. Walker called to see how Annie Mae was, but couldn't seem to get past the surface exchange of "How are you doing, kiddo?" and "I'll be okay, Dad."

Walker wants to have a more genuine conversation, but he's afraid. He suspects that at least some of the issues Annie Mae is dealing with are connected to their relationship. He suspects Annie Mae thinks he was not a good father, and he fears that she might for the first time tell him so. And that prospect terrifies him.

ous. At first, I kept trying and could be a valuable re-arguing was that I couldn't d simple. I didn't live up to made a mistake, Isaiah and

ndard, even a small mistake nit. If you are busy trying to u won't be able to engage in n't do that, you are likely to

es is that they fear being seen tent people who take the pos- cure, and "big enough" not to wledging even the possibility ence. No one is fooled.

get nervous about upcoming havior was not always moti-

friend, Evan, find themselves l that he will accuse her of just ally claims that her intentions about whether they actually nt to hurt Evan and wasn't act- ness in Sally's behavior. lexity of her motivations, Sally accusation of having bad inten- t is genuine: "As I think about vas lonely, and being with you or wanting to be with you. I did to what was going on for me."

third crucial step for grounding ibility for what you've contrib-

ently learned that his daughter r. Her college advisor called, let- herself into the university health as, but couldn't seem to get past kiddo?" and "I'll be okay, Dad." versation, but he's afraid. He sus- e is dealing with are connected to s he was not a good father, and he o. And that prospect terrifies him.

Up until now, without knowing for sure what his daughter thinks, Walker has been able to live with the hope that he's been a good father. He'd like nothing more than for that to be true. But he suspects that the truth is more complex. After all, he was away a lot, he wasn't as supportive as he might have been, and he made promises to Annie Mae that he didn't always keep.

Walker has two options. He can try to tiptoe through the conversations with his daughter, hoping against hope that Annie Mae doesn't raise the issue of how he has contributed to their troubled relationship and her current illness. Or he can work through some of his identity issues in advance and accept in his own heart his contribution to their problems.

It won't be easy. In fact, it may be the toughest thing Walker ever does. But if he's able to accept himself and his actions for what they are, and to take responsibility for them, both in his own mind and when talking with Annie Mae, he'll probably find that over time his conversations, with his daughter become easier. And, more important, Walker will find that he no longer needs to hide. His conversations with Annie Mae won't be fraught with the potential to strike at his all-or-nothing identity as a good father. He can say to his daughter, "I wish I'd been there for you more often. I'm so sorry and sad that I wasn't," and can approach her with compassion instead of fear.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is "identity" and how is identity present in all communication?
2. What's the difference between the "core" issues of "competence" and "goodness"?
3. Explain "the all-or-nothing syndrome."
4. What parts of your own story are in the authors' description of "Jimmy"?

## PROBES

1. Situation: You need to have a "difficult" conversation with a person at work who frequently leaves you off the list of recipients of important e-mails. Explain how the three core issues of "competence," "goodness," and "being worthy of love" might surface in this interaction.
2. Explain: "Grappling with identity issues is what life and growth are all about, and no amount of love or accomplishment or skill can insulate you from these challenges."
3. In Chapter 2, "Implication #5" is that "The most ordinary communication events are the most significant." Connect this idea to these authors' point, "If the waitress gives you a funny look as she collects her tip, you're cheap."
4. Explain "the and stance." Relate it to the concept of "nexting" from Chapter 2.
5. How can you acknowledge that "you have contributed to the problem" without blaming yourself for what's happening?

## Verbal and Nonverbal Dimensions of Talk

John Stewart and Carole Logan

### CHAPTER 4

# Verbal and Nonverbal Contact



This next reading starts with its own introduction and is longer than most, so I'll make this short. These pages come from an interpersonal communication text that I co-authored with Carole Logan, a colleague who teaches communication at the University of San Diego. As you can tell from the title, the reading reverses the popular tendency to discuss verbal and nonverbal communicating in separate chapters. We explain why at the start.

This selection is broad enough in coverage to give you a fairly comprehensive introduction to both language and most nonverbal cues. We resist the "verbal/nonverbal" dichotomy by locating the main communication building blocks on a continuum or sliding scale that runs from primarily verbal (written words), to mixed (vocal pacing, pause, loudness, pitch, and silence), to primarily nonverbal (gestures, eye gaze, facial expression, touch, and space). Our goal is to encourage you to view these aspects of your communicating as holistically as you can and to notice the ways the various kinds of cues affect each other.

We briefly review the three main ways language has been discussed—as a system of symbols, an activity, and what we call a "soup." Then we discuss some features of mixed and primarily nonverbal cues. If you read both this introductory overview and the four other readings in this chapter, I think you'll have a pretty decent understanding of these parts of communication's basic ingredients.

### MAIN IDEAS

- In actual communication, verbal and nonverbal elements always occur together, so it distorts both to treat them separately.
- Instead, think about a sliding scale from **primarily verbal** cues (written words) through **mixed** cues (talk speed, loudness, pitch) to **primarily nonverbal** cues (gestures, eye gaze, touch).
- The traditional approach to primarily verbal cues (language) is to treat it as a *system of symbols*, a view that is both informative and drastically oversimplified.
- A second approach treats language as an *activity*; this view is also valuable and incomplete.
- Today, language is often viewed as a "soup," a cultural surround we inhabit like a fish inhabits water.
- The "soup" view emphasizes the important connections between language and perception—perception of nature, gender, culture, and communication itself.
- The mixed cues of "voice" or *paralinguistics* significantly affect how talk is interpreted.
- Facial expression and eye behavior are mixed cues when they help regulate conversation.
- Gestures can significantly affect how words are interpreted.
- Facial expression, eye contact and gaze, and gestures are also sometimes primarily nonverbal cues.

- Proximity is a primarily nonverbal cue; four levels of proximity or space can be culturally identified.
- Touch is also a significant primarily nonverbal cue.

Interpersonal communication texts typically devote one chapter to verbal codes and a separate one to nonverbal communication. This practice began in the late 1960s when communication researchers and teachers first discovered the importance of the nonverbal parts of communicating—eye contact, body movement, facial expression, tone of voice, touch, silence, and so on. For about 30 years, most textbooks treated each subject as significant and distinct.

But now research is focusing more and more closely on conversations as people actually experience them, and it has become obvious that you can't really separate the verbal and nonverbal parts. In the words of two researchers, "It is impossible to study either verbal or nonverbal communication as isolated structures. Rather, these systems should be regarded as a unified communication construct."<sup>1</sup> And as teacher and theorist Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz puts it, "In discussing communication as consisting of verbal and nonverbal modes . . . we leave ourselves open to the impression that the two are somehow distinct and should be studied separately. This is not at all the case, and there is now a current body of literature devoted to rejoining the two."<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, almost this same point was made at the beginning of the twentieth century by Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founders of linguistics. Saussure said that language is like a sheet of paper, where sound makes up one side of the page and the concepts or thoughts make up the other. You can't pick up one side of the paper without picking up the other, and you can't cut one side without cutting the other. So it's best to think of them together.<sup>3</sup> We think the same way about the verbal and the nonverbal parts of communication; they're like the two sides of one sheet of paper.

This is actually the way they occur in human experience. For example, consider this conversation:

SCOTT: (*Smiling and nodding*) Hi, John Paul. Howzit goin'?

JOHN PAUL: (*Excited look*) Scott! (*Shaking hands*) It's good to see you! I heard you'd moved. Where've you been?

SCOTT: (*Smiling knowingly*) Nowhere, really. I've just been working and going to school. But Heather and I have been hanging out together quite a bit.

JOHN PAUL: (*Teasing*) Yeah, I heard that. What's the story with you two anyway?

SCOTT: (*Playful but cagey*) What do you mean "What's the story"? We just like each other, and we spend a lot of time together.

JOHN PAUL: (*Still teasing*) Yeah, like all weekend. And every afternoon. And most of the rest of the time.

## Part 1 Foundations of Interpersonal Communication

Part 1 Foundations of Interpersonal Communication

ity is a primarily nonverbal cue; four levels of proximity or space can be cultural-  
nified.

is also a significant primarily nonverbal cue.

personal communication texts typically devote one chapter to verbal  
; and a separate one to nonverbal communication. This practice began  
; late 1960s when communication researchers and teachers first discov-  
importance of the nonverbal parts of communicating—eye contact,  
ovement, facial expression, tone of voice, touch, silence, and so on. For  
years, most textbooks treated each subject as significant and distinct.  
now research is focusing more and more closely on conversations as  
actually experience them, and it has become obvious that you can't  
eparate the verbal and nonverbal parts. In the words of two researchers,  
possible to study either verbal or nonverbal communication as isolated  
res. Rather, these systems should be regarded as a unified communica-  
nstruct."<sup>1</sup> And as teacher and theorist Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz puts it, "In  
sing communication as consisting of verbal and nonverbal modes ... we  
urselves open to the impression that the two are somehow distinct and  
I be studied separately. This is not at all the case, and there is now a cur-  
ody of literature devoted to rejoining the two."<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, almost this same point was made at the beginning of the  
teenth century by Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founders of linguistics.  
ure said that language is like a sheet of paper, where sound makes up one  
f the page and the concepts or thoughts make up the other. You can't pick  
ne side of the paper without picking up the other, and you can't cut one side  
out cutting the other. So it's best to think of them together.<sup>3</sup> We think the

way about the verbal and the nonverbal parts of communication; they're  
the two sides of one sheet of paper.

This is actually the way they occur in human experience. For example, con-  
r this conversation:

RT: (*Smiling and nodding*) Hi, John Paul. Howzit goin'?

PN PAUL: (*Excited look*) Scott! (*Shaking hands*) It's good to see you! I heard  
you'd moved. Where've you been?

RT: (*Smiling knowingly*) Nowhere, really. I've just been working and going to  
school. But Heather and I have been hanging out together quite a bit.

PN PAUL: (*Teasing*) Yeah, I heard that. What's the story with you two anyway?  
RT: (*Playful but cagey*) What do you mean "What's the story"? We just like  
each other, and we spend a lot of time together.

PN PAUL: (*Still teasing*) Yeah, like all weekend. And every afternoon. And  
most of the rest of the time.

Scott: (*Turning the tables*) Well, what about you and Bill? I've heard you two are  
a duo ... partners ... an item.

JOHN PAUL: (*A little shy*) Where'd you hear that? Yeah, it's pretty true. (*Brighter*)  
And it's kind of neat, actually. It's the first time I've felt like part of a couple.  
We might even get an apartment together. But he's got to get a job that pays  
more. I can't support both of us.

SCOTT: (*Friendly*) Sounds like you've got the same questions Heather and I  
have. But her folks are also a problem.

JOHN PAUL: (*Serious*) My mom and dad are fine. But Bill's parents don't know  
anything about us, and I'm trying to get him to change that. In fact, I was  
thinking that I'd like to talk to you about that. I also wonder how you and  
Heather plan to actually set up living together. But I've got to get to work  
now. Give me your cell number so I can give you a call, okay?

John Paul and Scott build this conversation together by using verbal and  
nonverbal aspects of language simultaneously. There is never a point in the talk  
where these two parts of communicating are separate. When Scott's intent is  
to be "playful," he communicates this verbally and nonverbally to John Paul.  
When the tone of the conversation turns "serious," John Paul communicates  
this through posture, facial expression, and tone of voice, as well as through the  
words he chooses.

This chapter emphasizes the fact that people engaged in conversation con-  
struct all verbal and nonverbal aspects of talk together. To put it in researchers'  
terms, utterance meaning and nonverbal meaning are not discrete and indepen-  
dent.<sup>4</sup> This is true even of words written on a page. What you might consider  
to be "purely verbal" written words appear in a designed typeface, on a certain  
weight and color of paper, and surrounded by more or less white space. All of  
these nonverbal elements affect how people interpret the written words of any  
language. Similarly, even purely nonverbal behaviors, such as gestures or eye  
behavior, occur in the context of some spoken or written words. One way to  
sort out the verbal and nonverbal aspects of language is to think in terms of a  
continuum or sliding scale like the following.

| Primarily Verbal | Mixed                                               | Primarily Nonverbal                                       |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| written words    | vocal pacing,<br>pause, loudness,<br>pitch, silence | gestures, eye gaze,<br>facial expression,<br>touch, space |

Written words are classified as primarily verbal for the reasons we just  
gave. They appear in a nonverbal typeface surrounded by nonverbal space, but  
readers interpret or make meaning primarily on the basis of the words' verbal  
content. To the degree that you can isolate the words speakers use, they might  
be considered primarily verbal, too. But spoken words always come with vocal  
pacing, pause, loudness, pitch, and silence, and as a result these are labeled  
mixed. Gestures, facial expression, and so on are labeled primarily nonverbal

because they can occur without words, but they are usually interpreted in the context of spoken words.

It would be possible to highlight some of the verbal parts of Scott and John Paul's conversation. Scott says, "Howzit goin'?" rather than "How is it going?" or the even more formal "It's good to see you again." He uses the general phrase "spending a lot of time together" rather than a more specific description of his and Heather's activities. For John Paul, the word "couple" is significant. The two share an understanding of what it means, in this context, to say that parents are a "problem."

We could also pinpoint some nonverbal aspects of the conversation. For example, Scott's initial tone of voice is pretty low-key, but John Paul sounds excited to see him. They touch briefly as they shake hands. Their smiles "say" several different things—"It's good to see you." "I like you." "I'm teasing." "I'm teasing back." "We've got something in common." Since they're friends, they stand fairly close together.

In order to focus on the exclusively verbal or exclusively nonverbal parts, however, we'd have to distort what actually happens in Scott and John Paul's conversation. As we've said, the verbal and nonverbal aspects of the conversation are as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper. So in this reading,

We describe three approaches to *primarily verbal* cues ("language") that help clarify our reasons for combining verbal and nonverbal communication.

We discuss how several *mixed* cues affect meaning-making and how facial expression and gestures work together with words.

We describe the five most influential *primarily nonverbal* cues—facial expression, eye contact and gaze, space, touch, and body movement and gesture.

### THREE APPROACHES TO STUDYING PRIMARILY VERBAL CUES (LANGUAGE)

#### 1. Language Is a System of Symbols

Historically, this is the oldest point of view. From this perspective, language is a system made up of different kinds of words and the rules governing their combinations. Your grade-school teachers emphasized the systematic features of language when they helped you learn the differences among nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs and the rules for making grammatical sentences. When you think of German, Mandarin Chinese, or Spanish as a "language," you're thinking of it as a *language system*. Dictionaries record a part of a language system and provide a record of, for example, word histories and new words like ROM, uplink, and downsize.

Those who study language as a system emphasize that it is a system of symbols. They develop a point made about 2,500 years ago when the Greek philosopher Plato works on language this way: "Spoken

zy can occur without words, but they are usually interpreted in the spoken words.

It'd be possible to highlight some of the verbal parts of Scott and John's conversation. Scott says, "Howzit goin'?" rather than "How is it going?" more formal "It's good to see you again." He uses the general phrase "a lot of time together" rather than a more specific description of his activities. For John Paul, the word "couple" is significant. The understanding of what it means, in this context, to say that parents

blent." could also pinpoint some nonverbal aspects of the conversation. For Scott's initial tone of voice is pretty low-key, but John Paul sounds "see him. They touch briefly as they shake hands. Their smiles "say" different things—"It's good to see you." "I like you." "I'm teasing." "ack." "We've got something in common." Since they're friends, they

ly close together. der to focus on the exclusively verbal or exclusively nonverbal parts, ; we'd have to distort what actually happens in Scott and John Paul's tion. As we've said, the verbal and nonverbal aspects of the conversa as inseparable as the two sides of a piece of paper. So in this reading: describe three approaches to *primarily verbal* cues ("language") that help

ly our reasons for combining verbal and nonverbal communication. discuss how several *mixed* cues affect meaning-making and how facial ex-

sion and gestures work together with words. describe the five most influential *primarily nonverbal* cues—facial expression,

contact and gaze, space, touch, and body movement and gesture.

### THREE APPROACHES TO STUDYING PRIMARILY VERBAL CUES (LANGUAGE)

#### Language Is a System of Symbols

rically, this is the oldest point of view. From this perspective, language system made up of different kinds of words and the rules governing their inations. Your grade-school teachers emphasized the systematic features language when they helped you learn the differences among nouns, verbs, tives, and adverbs and the rules for making grammatical sentences. When think of German, Mandarin Chinese, or Spanish as a "language," you're king of it as a language *system*. Dictionaries record a part of a language sys-

and provide a record of, for example, word histories and new words like

1, uplink, and downsize.

Those who study language as a system emphasize that it is a system of

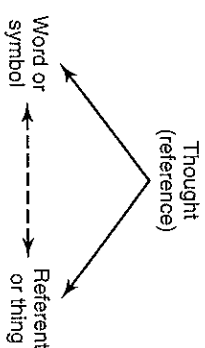
words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words.<sup>5</sup> As a contemporary linguist explains, "This criterion implies that for anything to be a language it must function so as to *symbolize* (represent for the organism) the not-necessarily-*here* and not-necessarily-*now*."<sup>6</sup> In brief, since a symbol is something that stands for something else, this approach emphasizes that units of language—words, usually—represent, or stand for, chunks or pieces of nonlinguistic reality. In the simplest terms, the word "cat" stands for the furry, purring, tail-twitching animal sitting in the corner.

One of the features of symbols that this approach also highlights is that they're *arbitrary*. This means that there is no necessary relationship between the word and the thing it symbolizes. Even though the word *five* is physically smaller than the word *three*, the quantity that *five* symbolizes is larger. So there's no necessary relationship between word (in this case, its size) and meaning. Or consider the words that people from different language communities use to symbolize a dwelling where someone lives: *casa* in Spanish, *maison* in French, and *Haus* in German. This couldn't happen unless the relationship between the word and its meaning were arbitrary.

A classic book, first published in 1923, elaborated just this point. Its authors, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, diagrammed this insight with their famous "triangle of meaning" (see Figure 4-1).<sup>7</sup> Ogden and Richards's triangle is meant to illustrate how words are related to both thoughts and things. The word-thought relationship is direct—that's why the line is solid. For Aristotle, words stood for thoughts. The relationship between thought and thing was also more or less direct. But the word-thing relationship is arbitrary; there is no necessary relationship between the word and its referent. The dotted line across the bottom of the triangle emphasizes this point.

The main advantage of viewing language as a system of arbitrary symbols is that it alerts us to the dangers of abstractions and of the assumptions people make about what words mean by emphasizing that the *thought* or meaning associated with a word may or may not be directly related to the *thing* the word symbolizes. The clearest, most easily understood words are those that are easiest to connect with concrete reality: "this car," "my CD collection," "his blue hair." But from Ogden and Richards's point of view, people should be careful with abstract words like "safety," "style," "love," and "honesty," because the thoughts that they call up may or may not be linked to concrete realities that they symbolize. One person's writing or talk about safety may be connected with safety pins, bank vaults, or a seat belt, and because of the dotted-line relationship in the triangle,

FIGURE 4-1 Ogden and Richards's triangle of meaning.



the individual to whom the person is writing or talking may not be able to tell the difference. We can also learn from this perspective that, since the relationship between words and meanings is arbitrary, we should never assume that another person means exactly what we do, even when he or she uses the same words. What does "early" mean, for example, when your mom or dad tells you to "get home early"? When your teacher says you should "get started early on your papers"? When the person you're dating feels it's too early in the relationship for sex? When you tell your roommate you want to get up early? Assumptions about identical word meaning often create communication problems.

This view of language is also drastically oversimplified, however. The triangle of meaning makes it appear that language is essentially made up of concrete nouns, labels for things in the world. It doesn't take much reflection to realize that language is much more complicated than that. Often the topic you're discussing and the ideas you want to express require abstract words, such as "love," "pride," and "homelessness." The advice to avoid these kinds of words because there are no "things" or "referents" to which they are even arbitrarily related is not very practical. And what about words like "and," "whether," "however," and "larger"? It can be really confusing to try to figure out what things these words symbolize. Even more important, we don't usually experience language as individual words, but as statements, utterances, messages, or parts of a conversation. So an approach that tries to explain living language by focusing on individual words has to be limited. All this is why it's partly true to say that language is a system of symbols, but there's much more to it than that.

## 2. Language Is an Activity

A second, more recent approach to the study of language views it as an activity. The most influential version of this approach began in the 1950s when several researchers showed how many utterances actually perform actions. They called these utterances "speech acts." For example, the words "I will" or "I do" in a marriage ceremony are not just symbolizing or referring to getting married. Rather, they are an important part of the activity of marrying itself. If they're not said at the right time by the right people, the marriage hasn't happened. Similarly, the words "I agree" or "Okay, it's a deal" can perform the activity of buying, selling, or contracting for work. And "Howzitgoin'?" is not about a greeting; it is the activity of greeting itself. A group of researchers called conversation analysts have shown how to extend and apply this insight about the action-performing function of language.

Conversation analysts, for instance, have identified the crucial features of many of the speech acts that people typically perform, such as promise, request, threat, offer, command, compliment, and greeting.<sup>8</sup> Each of these terms labels what certain utterances *do* rather than what they symbolize or say. And, these researchers point out, a given utterance won't perform this action unless it has certain features. For example, a *request* requires the speaker to ask for a preferred action from the hearer, and the person who hasn't done this has not

ual to whom the person is writing or talking may not be able to tell ice. We can also learn from this perspective that, since the relationship words and meanings is arbitrary, we should never assume that another ans exactly what we do, even when he or she uses the same words. ; "early" mean, for example, when your mom or dad tells you to "get y"? When your teacher says you should "get started early on your When the person you're dating feels it's too early in the relationship about you tell your roommate you want to get up early? Assumptions about

You can't really create communication procedures. The word meaning often creates communication procedures. The view of language is also drastically oversimplified, however. The meaning makes it appear that language is essentially made up of meaning labels for things in the world. It doesn't take much reflection to see how complicated that is. Often the topic you're talking about is much more complicated than that. Often the topic you're talking about is much more complicated than that. Often the topic you're talking about is much more complicated than that. Often the topic you're talking about is much more complicated than that.

## Language Is an Activity

nd, more recent approach to the study of language views it as a most influential version of this approach began in the 1950s when several chers showed how many utterances actually perform actions. They called utterances "speech acts." For example, the words "I will" or "I do" in a age ceremony are not just symbolizing or referring to getting married. r, they are an important part of the activity of marrying itself. If they're aid at the right time by the right people, the marriage hasn't happened. arly, the words "I agree" or "Okay, it's a deal" can perform the activity of agreeing, selling, or contracting for work. And "Howzitgoin'?" is not about the ing; it is the activity of greeting itself. A group of researchers called con- tion analysts have shown how to extend and apply this insight about the

ation analysts have shown that the most important function of language-in-performing analysts, for instance, have identified the crucial features of Conversation analysts, for instance, have identified the crucial features of the speech acts that people typically perform, such as promise, request, at offer, command, compliment, and greeting.<sup>8</sup> Each of these terms labels it certain utterances *do* rather than what they symbolize or say. And, these researchers point out, a given utterance won't perform this action unless it has main features. For example, a *request* requires the speaker to ask for a preferred

competently performed a request. A *promise* is also about a preferred future behavior, but it identifies what the speaker rather than the hearer will do.

If you understand the building blocks of each speech act, you can see why some *indirect* requests and promises will work and others won't. For example, "Are you taking your car to the game tonight?" could function as a *request* for a ride to the game, even though it does not actually identify a preferred future behavior. But it can only work as a request when the context allows both speaker and hearer to fill in the parts that the words themselves leave out. This explains how problems arise when one person fills in the blanks and another doesn't, or when one person means or hears a promise even though the crucial parts of the speech act are absent. For example, when Reggie and Kevin were discussing the game they both wanted to attend, Reggie heard Kevin's "Yeah, I'll be driving" as a *promise* to give him a ride. But Kevin meant it only as a response to Reggie's direct question. So he was surprised and a little angry when Reggie called to confirm the ride he'd "promised."

Conversation analysts have also studied several ways in which people collaborate to mutually construct some speech acts. For example, greetings, good-byes, invitations, apologies, offers, and congratulations are all speech acts that almost always require two or more conversational moves rather than just one. If one conversation partner greets the other, the expectation is that the other will respond with another greeting. If this doesn't happen, the speech act of "greeting" has only partly occurred. The same thing happens with good-byes; it takes both one person's "good-bye" *and* the other person's response. This requirement can create problems when one person means to be leaving and the other doesn't pick up on it. Similarly, an invitation is expected to be followed by an acceptance, questioning, or rejection of the invitation; an apology is expected to be followed by an acceptance or rejection, and so on. As one conversation analyst puts it:

As we shall see, when one of these first actions has been produced, participants orient to the presence or absence of the relevant second action. There is an expectation by participants that the second action should be produced, and when it does not occur, participants behave as if it should have.<sup>9</sup>

Many insights into language use have been generated by people viewing it as an activity that people carry out by following certain sets of conversational rules. At the same time, the more researchers have studied communication as people actually experience it, the more they've recognized that although a great deal can be learned about the individual moves conversation partners make with their various speech acts, natural conversations almost always include unpredictable events or surprises. People improvise as much as they follow conversational rules. In other words, there is a structure to conversation, but it is less like the repetitive pattern followed by a supermarket checkout clerk and more like the loose and varied collaboration of five good musicians getting together to jam.

In summary, conversation analysts have demonstrated the value of studying language as an activity. They have shown that every time we say something,

we're also doing something—that speech is a kind of action. They have cataloged many of the actions that people perform by talking and have also shown that some of these actions are produced collaboratively. But they have only been able to consider a few of the important nonverbal elements of conversation, and they have had to admit that there is almost as much improvisation as rule following. Every day people engage in greetings, good-byes, promises, threats, compliments, offers, commands, requests, and dozens of other conversational acts. But we also improvise and modify expected patterns. Finally, conversational analysts have very little to say about the crucial identity-constructing function of communication.... We believe that the most helpful approach to language is the one that includes a focus on identities.

### 3. Language Is a Soup

This may sound a little weird, but stay with us for a few paragraphs. This approach does include identities.

Especially in the last 30 years, many scholars have recognized the limitations of both the system and action views of language. Both of these views treat language as a tool that humans manipulate, either to arbitrarily stand for something or to perform an action. As we have explained, there's some truth to these views, and they can teach us some important things about language. But language is more than a tool. If it were just a tool, we could lay it aside when we didn't need it and pick up some other tool, just as we can lay aside a screwdriver and pick up a hammer. But we can't do that. As humans, we're immersed in language, like a fish is immersed in water. And this quality is what the "soup" metaphor is meant to highlight. As one writer puts it:

In all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with [people] and in the last analysis with ourselves and we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.<sup>10</sup>

This is what it means to say that language is a soup. We're immersed in it from birth to death, just as a fish is immersed in the water in which it lives.

In fact, language experience may begin even before birth. As soon as 20 weeks after conception, the human fetus has functioning ears and is beginning to respond to sounds.<sup>11</sup> Its mother's voice is clearly one sound the fetus learns to identify.<sup>12</sup> Some pregnant couples talk to and play music for their unborn child. When the infant is born, it typically enters an environment of exclamations and greetings. Then verbal and nonverbal communication experiences fill the infant's life. Touch, eye contact, smiles, and a great deal of talk are directed to him or her. As infants develop, parents and other

doing something—that speech is a kind of action. They have catalogued the actions that people perform by talking and have also shown how these actions are produced collaboratively. But they have only been considering a few of the important nonverbal elements of conversation. We have had to admit that there is almost as much improvisation as rule in everyday conversation. Every day people engage in greetings, good-byes, promises, threats, offers, commands, requests, and dozens of other conversational acts. We also improvise and modify expected patterns. Finally, conversation is also a very little to say about the crucial identity-constructing function of language. We believe that the most helpful approach to language is one that includes a focus on identities.

age Is a Soup

r sound a little weird, but stay with us for a new perspective on how we think about language. In the last 30 years, many scholars have recognized the limitations of the traditional view of language. Both of these views treat language as a system and action views of language. Both of these views treat language as a tool that humans manipulate, either to arbitrarily stand for something or to perform an action. As we have explained, there's some truth to both of these views, but they're incomplete. We could lay it aside when we want to, but we can't teach us some important things about language. But we can teach us some important things about language. But we can't teach us more than a tool. If it were just a tool, we could lay it aside when we want to, but we can't teach us some important things about language. It is more than a tool. If it were just a tool, we could lay it aside when we want to, but we can't teach us some important things about language. We need it and pick up some other tool, just as we can lay aside a screwdriver and pick up a hammer. But we can't do that. As humans, we're immersed in language like a fish is immersed in water. And this quality is what the "soup" of language is. Like a fish is immersed in water. And this quality is what the "soup" of language is.

all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are  
 rays already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up,  
 d we become acquainted with [people] and in the last analysis with ourselves  
 ven we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a  
 eexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it  
 eans acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how  
 confronts us.

what it means to say that language is a soup. We're making

to death, just as a fish is immersed in the water.<sup>10</sup> As soon as  
in fact, language experience may begin even before birth. In  
weeks after conception, the human fetus has functioning ears and  
to respond to sounds.<sup>11</sup> Its mother's voice is clearly one sound  
learning to identify.<sup>12</sup> Some pregnant couples talk to and play music for  
learns to identify.

When the infant is born, it is already surrounded by verbal and nonverbal communication from others. Verbal communication includes exclamations and greetings. Then verbal and nonverbal communication include touch, eye contact, smiles, and a great deal of other interactions that fill the infant's life. Touch, eye contact, smiles, and a great deal of other interactions fill the infant's life. Touch, eye contact, smiles, and a great deal of other interactions fill the infant's life. Touch, eye contact, smiles, and a great deal of other interactions fill the infant's life.

by providing a context for talk, by encouraging them with positive attitudes toward talk or discouraging them with negative attitudes, and by interpreting, modeling, and extending talk.<sup>13</sup> This process continues right up to the last, tearful good-byes a person hears at death. In between, humans live more or less like nutritious morsels in a broth of language. This soup includes all the verbal and nonverbal parts of our communicative life. In fact, the theorists and researchers who treat language as a soup have begun to mean by "language" what used to be called "communication"—all the verbal and nonverbal, oral and nonoral, ways that humans make meaning together. As you might be assuming, this view of language fits most comfortably with the approach to communication outlined in Chapter 2.

**Language and Perception** If this notion of language as a soup sounds a little abstract, consider one important practical implication of the fact that language is all-encompassing: Because we are immersed in language all our lives, language and perception are thoroughly interrelated... When we perceive, we select, organize, and make meaning out of the things and events we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. The point that language and perception are thoroughly interrelated means that everything we perceive, all the things that make up our world, is affected by the language in which we live. In the early 20th century, one version of this insight about language and perception was called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for the two people who originally wrote about it, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. It was summarized by Whorf in these words:

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his [or her] analysis of impressions.... We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, if you have spent enough time on boats and around the water to learn a dozen different words for water conditions, you will perceive more differences in the water than will the person who was born and raised in Cheyenne, Oklahoma City, or Calgary. That person might distinguish between *waves* and *smooth water*, but you will see and feel differences between *cats' paws*, *ripples*, *chop*, and *swells* that he or she probably won't even notice.<sup>15</sup> Or if you have learned important meanings for *latex*, *natural*, *lubricated*, and *spermicidal*, you can make distinctions among condoms that were impossible for the high school graduate of the 1970s or early 1980s.

A Chinese-American woman, Mandy Lam, made the point that she felt "similar to the fish that lives in an area of water where the river mixes with the ocean. I have only to travel a little further in either direction to experience the extremes." Her grandparents speak only Chinese, and she relates to them, and often to her parents and other elders, in Chinese ways. But all her premoved classes are in English, and she lives in an almost completely English world at school.

As the two of us try in this [essay] to write about communication as a continuous, complex, collaborative meaning-making process, we especially notice two particular ways in which our native language limits our perceptions. The first has to do with the ways that the English language affects how people understand ongoing processes. Unlike some languages, English maintains clear distinctions between noun subjects and verb predicates, causes and effects, beginnings and ends, and this affects how native English speakers perceive communication. A surprising number of other language systems do not do this. According to one researcher, for example, Navajo speakers characteristically talk in terms of processes—uncaused, ongoing, incomplete, dynamic happenings. The word that Navajos use for wagon, for example, translates roughly as “wood rolls about hooplike.”<sup>16</sup> The Navajo words that we would translate as “He begins to carry a stone” mean not that the actor produces an action, but that the person is simply linked with a given round object and with an already existing, continuous movement of all round objects in the universe. The English language, by contrast, requires its users to talk in terms of present, past, future, cause and effect, beginning and end. Problems arise when some things that English speakers would like to discuss just can’t be expressed in these terms. To continue our example, we would like to be able to talk more clearly about the emergent, ongoing nature of communication. But, especially since communication doesn’t always obey the rules of cause and effect, the noun-plus-verb-plus-object structure of the English language makes it difficult to do this. For this topic, Navajo would probably work better than English.

The second way in which we notice that the English language affects our discussion of communication has to do with the ways English speakers perceive gender differences. One accomplishment of research encouraged by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s is that people now recognize how the male bias of standard American English has contributed to the ways in which English-speaking cultures perceive women and men. The fact that, until recently, there were no female firefighters was not caused simply by the existence of the word *fireman*. It’s not that simple. But research indicates that gender-biased words affect perceptions in at least three ways. They shape people’s attitudes about careers that are “appropriate” for one sex but not for the other, they lead some women to believe that certain jobs and roles aren’t attainable, and they contribute to the belief that men deserve higher status in society than do women.<sup>17</sup> This is why changes in job titles have helped open several occupations to more equal male-female participation. Consider, for example, *parking checker* instead of *salesman*, and *server* instead of *waiter* or *waitress*. We have also just about stopped referring to female physicians as *woman doctors* and female attorneys as *lady lawyers*, and it is more than a coincidence that these changes have been accompanied by significant increases in the numbers

two of us try in this [essay] to write about communication as a complex, collaborative meaning-making process, we especially particular ways in which our native language limits our perception first has to do with the ways that the English language affects how we understand ongoing processes. Unlike some languages, English maintains distinctions between noun subjects and verb predicates, speakers' beginnings and ends, and this affects how native English speakers communicate. A surprising number of other language systems do this. According to one researcher, for example, Navajo speakers historically talk in terms of processes—uncaused, ongoing, incomplete, happenings. The word that Navajos use for wagon, for example, is roughly as "wood rolls about hooplike."<sup>16</sup> The Navajo words translate as "He begins to carry a stone" mean not that the actor is an action, but that the person is simply linked with a given round object with an already existing, continuous movement of all round objects in reverse. The English language, by contrast, requires its users to talk in the present, past, future, cause and effect, beginning and end. Problems with some things that English speakers would like to discuss just can't be expressed in these terms. To continue our example, we would like to be able more clearly about the emergent, ongoing nature of communication—especially since communication doesn't always obey the rules of cause and effect, the noun-plus-verb-plus-object structure of the English language—it difficult to do this. For this topic, Navajo would probably work better

it difficult to see how the English language affects English. The second way in which we notice that the English language affects the second way in which we notice that the English language affects discussion of communication has to do with the ways English speakers ve gender differences. One accomplishment of research encouraged by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s is that people now recognize the male bias of standard American English has contributed to the ways rich English-speaking cultures perceive women and men. The fact that, recently, there were no female firefighters was not caused simply by the force of the word *fireman*. It's not that simple. But research indicates that er-biased words affect perceptions in at least three ways. They shape le's attitudes about careers that are "appropriate" for one sex but not for ther, they lead some women to believe that certain jobs and roles aren't nable, and they contribute to the belief that men deserve higher status open-ly than do women.<sup>17</sup> This is why changes in job titles have helped open-ral occupations to more equal male-female participation. Consider, for ex-ple, *parking checker* instead of *metermaid*, *chair* or *chairperson* instead of *chair- person* instead of *salesman*, and *server* instead of *waiter* or *waitress*. We e also just about stopped referring to female physicians as woman doctors female attorneys as lady lawyers, and it is more than a coincidence that se changes have been accompanied by significant increases in the numbers of those two professions.

Since the mid-1990s, both scholarly and popular books have emphasized this point about gender, language, and perception by highlighting the differences between the language worlds into which men and women are socialized in North America. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Communication*<sup>18</sup> was on the best-seller list for months, and John Gray has sold millions of copies of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*<sup>19</sup> and *Mars and Venus in Love*.<sup>20</sup> All of these books describe the ways in which women's communication differs from men's and explain how many problems between genders are influenced by these differences. Some people complain that the books reinforce the very stereotypes they're trying to reduce by generalizing about "women's communication" and "men's communication." Despite the very real danger of this oversimplification, however, there is considerable research evidence to indicate that most North American, English-speaking women and most of their male counterparts do communicate differently. In other words, carefully controlled observations of how these men and women actually talk found that there are important gender-linked patterns.

The women observed in these studies generally use communication as a primary way to establish and maintain relationships with others, whereas the men generally talk to exert control, preserve independence, and enhance status. More specifically, most of these women's communicating is characterized by seven features that are not generally found in the men's talk: an emphasis on equality, support, attention to the relationship, inclusivity, concreteness, and tentativeness, and a preference for collaborative meaning-making. Men's communicating is described in this same research as functioning to exhibit knowledge or skill, accomplish goals, assert dominance, avoid tentativeness, stay abstract rather than concrete, and minimize relationship responsiveness....<sup>21</sup>

To summarize, from the point of view of this soup or fish-in-water idea, language is more than a *system* we use or an *activity* we perform. It is larger than any of us; it happens to us and we are subject to it as much as we manipulate or use it.... When studied from this third perspective, language has both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Language researchers and teachers have become increasingly aware that language as people actually live it is less of a system or action and more of a mutual event or collaborative process. "Language" is the term these researchers and teachers use for the communicating that, as [was] said in Chapter 2, makes us who we are.

**MIXED CUES: VOICE, SILENCE, FACE AND WORDS,  
GESTURES AND WORDS**

The first section of this reading was about the primarily verbal parts of communication—the parts that are often called “language.” By now, you know that language includes both verbal and nonverbal elements, but that it can still

be distinguished from the "mixed" parts, which include the rate, pitch, volume, and quality of the voice; silence; facial expressions accompanying words; and gestures that accompany words. Let's consider next how these mixed cues operate.

## Voice

Sometimes people overlook the fact that spoken language includes many different nonverbal vocal elements. The technical term for these cues is *paralinguistics*, and they include rate of speech, pitch variation, volume, and vocal quality. If you think about your perceptions of someone who speaks really rapidly or slowly, you have a sense of how rate affects communicating. Listeners and conversation partners also make inferences about how monotone or melodic speech is, how softly or loudly someone speaks, and whether a speaker's vocal quality is resonant, squeaky, nasal, or breathy. Sometimes people manipulate these four dimensions of their voice to assist listeners in interpreting what they're saying, whether they're emphasizing various words or phrases, expressing feelings, or indicating when they're serious and when they're sarcastic or joking. In other cases, speakers don't mean to manipulate any of the four; they're "just talking normally" when people hear them as too fast, as too soft, as a monotone, or as too loud.

As these examples suggest, one of the ways people interpret others' vocal cues is to make stereotyped judgments about the speakers' personalities. It's not a good idea, but we do it nonetheless. For example, a male with a breathy voice is likely to be stereotyped as gay, or at least as young and artistic, whereas a female with the same vocal quality is usually thought of as "more feminine," prettier, more petite, more effervescent, more high-strung, and shallower.

Nasal voices are heard as undesirable for both males and females, and low, deep voices are perceived as being more sophisticated, more appealing, and sexier than are higher-pitched voices. People also use vocal cues to draw conclusions about the age, sex, and ethnicity of speakers they hear. What can you conclude from the fact that we use voices this way? According to Mark Knapp:

You should be quick to challenge the cliché that vocal cues only concern how something is said—frequently they are what is said. What is said might be an attitude ("I like you" or "I'm superior to you"), it might be an emotion... or it might be the presentation of some aspect of your personality, background, or physical features. Vocal cues will, depending on the situation and the communicators, carry a great deal of information....<sup>23</sup>

## Silence

With silence we express the most varied and conflicting states, sentiments, thoughts and desires. Silence is meaningful. There is the silence of fear and terror, the silence of anger and stupor, of pain and joy.... "Dumb silence" is a contradictory thing; the two terms exclude each other.

shed from the “mixed” parts, which include the rate, pitch, volume, of the voice; silence; facial expressions accompanying words; and it accompany words. Let’s consider next how these mixed cues

people overlook the fact that spoken language includes many different vocal elements. The technical term for these cues is *paralinguistics*; include rate of speech, pitch variation, volume, and vocal quality. Ask about your perceptions of someone who speaks really rapidly or slowly—o-o-w-l-y; you have a sense of how rate affects communicating, and conversation partners also make inferences about how monotonous and conversational partners also make inferences about how monotonic speech is, how softly or loudly someone speaks, and whether melodic speech is resonant, squeaky, nasal, or breathy. Sometimes a vocal quality is resonant, squeaky, nasal, or breathy. Sometimes manipulate these four dimensions of their voice to assist listeners in what they're saying, whether they're emphasizing various words, expressing feelings, or indicating when they're serious and when sarcastic or joking. In other cases, speakers don't mean to manipulate or joke; they're "just talking normally" when people hear them as too loud, too soft, too fast, or as too loud.

[illegible]

**ce**

silence we express the most varied and conflicting states, sentiments,  
thoughts and desires. Silence is meaningful. There is the silence of fear and ter-  
rors of wonder and stupor, of pain and joy... "Dumb silence" is a contradictory  
of the same thing, the two terms exclude each other.

other, silence is not dumb and whatever is dumb is not silent. Silence is a form of communication ... dumbness, on the other hand, isolates and excludes us from all communication.<sup>24</sup>

The reason we classify silence as a mixed cue is that it most often becomes significant in the context of talk. As one author puts it, "A discourse without pauses [is] incomprehensible. Silence is not an interval ... but the bridge that unites sounds."<sup>25</sup> In other words, silence is usually noticed because of the way it relates to speaking. Examples include the failure or refusal to respond to a question, and the pregnant pause. Even the silence of the forest, prairie, mountain, lake, or bayou is most meaningful because of the way it contrasts with the noises of city crowds.

Silence is one of the least understood nonverbal behaviors, partly because people use and interpret it in so many different ways. Silence can be interpreted to mean apathy, patience, boredom, fear, sadness, love, intimacy, anger, or intimidation. We have talked with married couples who use silence as a weapon. One husband, who knew his wife hated it when he didn't talk out a problem, sometimes would refuse to talk to her for two or three days. His wife said she found this "devastating." When there are prolonged silences in group meetings, people start shifting nervously and making inferences, such as "nobody is interested," "people don't like this group," and "nobody really cares what we're doing."

But silence also works in positive ways. Beginning teachers, for example, have to learn that the silence that sometimes comes after they ask their students a question can be very fruitful. A group's silence can mean that there's a lot of thinking going on. Two close friends may also say nothing to each other just so they can share the experience of the moment. Or in an interview, silence can be a welcome opportunity for the interviewee to elaborate, return to a topic discussed earlier, or simply reorganize her or his thoughts. A friend of ours reported that the long silences he and his mother shared during the last two days of her life were some of the richest times they had spent together. Love, warmth, and sympathy are sometimes best expressed through silent facial and body movements and touch.

## Facial Expression and Words

[Later in] this reading, we'll discuss facial expression as a primarily nonverbal cue. But peoples' faces also connect with words when they help to regulate utterance "turns" in conversations, and when they do, they can be considered mixed cues. The next time you're in a conversation, notice how you know when it's your turn to talk. The other person's face and eyes will almost always "tell" you. People also use faces and eyes to tell someone who approaches them either that they are welcoming the person into conversation or that they would rather be left alone.

Eye behavior is an important part of facial expression, and people use specific forms of eye behavior to accomplish several general goals in most conversations. First, we look away when we're having difficulty putting our thoughts into words. The amount of information we seem to be getting from another's

eyes can be intense enough to be distracting, so if we're having trouble saying what we want to say, we look away to reduce the amount of input.

We also use eye contact to monitor feedback, to check the other's responses to the conversation. If we notice that the person is looking at us, we infer that she or he is paying attention; if we see that the person is staring into space, or over our shoulder to something or someone behind us, we draw the opposite conclusion. This phenomenon often helps make "cocktail party" conversation uncomfortablely superficial. Neither conversation partner wants to be left standing alone, so both are as concerned about the next conversation as they are about the current one. As a result, both divide their looking between eye contact with the other and the search for the next partner.

Visual contact is also a primary way to indicate whose turn it is to talk. When a person tries to "catch the eye" of a server in a restaurant, the point is to open the channel, to initiate talk. And the same thing happens in conversation; I can "tell" you that it's your turn to talk by making eye contact with you. One communication researcher summarizes the typical conversation pattern in this way: "As the speaker comes to the end of an utterance or thought unit, gazing at the listener will continue as the listener assumes the speaking role; the listener will maintain gaze until the speaking role is assumed when he or she will look away. When the speaker does not yield a speaking turn by glancing at the other, the listener will probably delay a response or fail to respond....<sup>26</sup> Of course, this description is accurate for some cultures and not for others. Like other nonverbal cues, the facial expressions that accompany words vary among ethnic groups, genders, social classes, and sexual preferences. Eye contact and facial expressions are so critical to regulating conversations that a speaker's elimination of either one will seriously affect the responses of the listener.

## Gestures and Words

Researcher David McNeill emphasizes why gestures can be considered mixed cues by examining their connection to spoken words. In one of McNeill's articles, "So You Think Gestures Are Nonverbal?" he explains how they are not just nonverbal because gestures and speech are part of the same language structure. As he puts it, certain "gestures are verbal. They are the overt products of the same internal processes that produce the other overt product, speech." He goes on to point out that this is another reason we have to change what we mean by "language." He writes, "We tend to consider linguistic what we can write down, and nonlinguistic, everything else....<sup>27</sup> However, he says, we now know better. Language is made up of both verbal and nonverbal aspects. This is "contrary to the idea of body language, that is, a separate system of body movement and postural signals that is thought to obey its own laws and convey its own... meanings."<sup>28</sup> It's misleading to talk of body language, McNeill argues, because posture and gesture are too intimately connected with the other part of language—words....

intense enough to be distracting, so if we're having trouble saying  
ant to say, we look away to reduce the amount of input.  
o use eye contact to monitor feedback, to check the other's responses  
ersion. If we notice that the person is looking at us, we infer that  
s paying attention; if we see that the person is staring into space, or  
holder to something or someone behind us, we draw the opposite  
1. This phenomenon often helps make "cocktail party" conversation  
tably superficial. Neither conversation partner wants to be left stand-  
so both are as concerned about the next conversation as they are about  
it one. As a result, both divide their looking between eye contact with  
and the search for the next partner.

l contact is also a primary way to indicate whose turn it is to talk.  
erson tries to "catch the eye" of a server in a restaurant; the point is to  
channel, to initiate talk. And the same thing happens in conversation;  
1" you that it's your turn to talk by making eye contact with you. One  
ication researcher summarizes the typical conversation pattern in this  
s the speaker comes to the end of an utterance or thought unit, gazing  
tender will continue as the listener assumes the speaking role; the listener  
tain gaze until the speaking role is assumed when he or she will look  
hen the speaker does not yield a speaking turn by glancing at the other,  
ner will probably delay a response or fail to respond...<sup>25</sup> Of course,  
cription is accurate for some cultures and not for others. Like other non-  
ues, the facial expressions that accompany words vary among ethnic  
genders, social classes, and sexual preferences. Eye contact and facial  
ions are so critical to regulating conversations that a speaker's elimina-  
either one will seriously affect the responses of the listener.

## res and Words

ther David McNeill emphasizes why gestures can be considered mixed cues  
mining their connection to spoken words. In one of McNeill's articles, "So  
ink Gestures Are Nonverbal?" he explains how they are not just nonverbal,  
se gestures and speech are part of the same language structure. As he puts  
ain "gestures are verbal. They are the overt products of the same internal  
sses that produce the other overt product, speech." He goes on to point out  
nis is another reason we have to change what we mean by "language." He  
s, "We tend to consider linguistic what we can write down, and nonlinguis-  
everything else....<sup>27</sup> However, he says, we now know better. Language is  
up of both verbal and nonverbal aspects. This is "contrary to the idea of  
language, that is, a separate system of body movement and postural sig-  
that is thought to obey its own laws and convey its own... meanings."<sup>28</sup> It's  
adding to talk of body language, McNeill argues, because posture and gesture  
oo intimately connected with the other part of language—words....

Communication researcher Janet Bavelas and her colleagues have extended  
McNeill's work by studying what they call interactive gestures. These are  
movements that are related not to the content of the conversation, but to the  
relationship between or among the people communicating. Interactive gestures  
include the listener and thus "act to maintain the conversation as a social  
system."<sup>29</sup> For example, Bavelas describes how one speaker was discussing the  
summer job options that would contribute the most to his career goal.

The listener had suggested earlier that working for Canada Customs would  
be a good idea; the speaker, after listing several other possibilities, adds "and  
Customs is DEFINITELY career-oriented." As he said "Customs," the speaker  
moved his hand up and toward the other person (almost as if tossing something  
to him), with palm up, fingers slightly curled, and thumb pointing directly at  
the other at the peak of the movement. Our translation of this gesture is "which  
YOU suggested," that is, the speaker credits the other person with the idea.<sup>30</sup>

Other interactive gestures were translated as "Do you get what I mean?"  
"Would you give me the answer?" and "No, no, I'll get it myself." All of these  
gestures are connected not to the conversational topic, but to the other speaker.  
Thus, they add important social content to the conversation, content separate  
from what is contributed verbally. In this way, they take on part of the work  
of mutual meaning constructing that is normally thought to be done only by  
words. So these so-called nonverbal gestures are actually functioning exactly as  
words do to add substance to the conversation.

Bavelas and her colleagues explain the importance of this added substance  
when they write:

An interesting, intrinsic problem in dialogue is that, while both partners must  
remain involved, only one person can talk at once. Whenever a speaker has the  
floor, there exists the possibility that the conversation could veer off into mono-  
logue. One solution to the problem... is for the speaker to involve the listener  
regularly. To a certain extent, the speaker can do this by verbal statements, such  
as "You know," "As you said," "As you know," "I'm sure you agree," etc. How-  
ever, the frequent use of verbal interjections and addenda would constantly  
disrupt the flow of content, so nonverbal means of seeking or maintaining  
involvement are well suited to this function....

We propose that interactive gestures, for all their many specific forms and  
translations, form a class with the common function of including the listener  
and thereby counteracting the beginning of a drift toward monologue that is  
necessarily created every time one person has the floor.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, vocal rate, pitch, volume, and quality affect how people collab-  
oratively construct meaning in communication; this is why they can be thought  
of as mixed cues. Silence is another influential mixed building block. In addi-  
tion, many facial expressions, much eye behavior, and even many gestures work  
so intimately with spoken words that they should also be thought of as mixed.

## PRIMARYLY NONVERBAL CUES: FACE, EYE CONTACT AND GAZE, SPACE, TOUCH, MOVEMENT AND GESTURE

Although we're not going to present an exhaustive list of primarily nonverbal cues (for example, we omit appearance and dress, smells, time, and colors), we think that the following five categories will give you a broad sense of the most influential primarily nonverbal parts of your communicating.

### Facial Expression

Your face is probably the most expressive part of your body and one of the most important focal points for nonverbal communicating. Most of the time, people are unaware of how much they rely on faces to give and get information. But a little reflection—or reading some of the research—can change your level of awareness. Consider, for example, how important the face is in expressing emotion. An extensive program of research has demonstrated that certain basic emotions are facially expressed in similar ways across cultures.<sup>32</sup> Every culture studied so far has been found to include some conventional facial expressions that people use to communicate joy or happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, and disgust. There are some culture-specific rules for the display of these emotions, but they are expressed in very similar ways in most cultures.

Researchers have discovered these similarities by showing photographs of North American faces, for example, to Japanese or New Guineans to observers, and then showing photographs of Japanese or New Guineans to North Americans. In most cases, members of one culture were able to identify accurately the emotions being expressed by the faces of persons from the other cultures.<sup>33</sup> They recognized, for example, that surprise is consistently communicated by a face with widened eyes, head tilted up, raised brow, and open mouth. Disgust is communicated with brows pulled down, wrinkled nose, and a mouth

with raised upper lip and downturned corners. Although the facial expression of emotions is similar across cultures, there are important differences in facial displays, for example, between Japanese and North Americans. Historically, Japanese have been taught to mask negative facial expressions with smiles and laughter and to display less facial emotion overall.<sup>34</sup> There are a number of competing ideas about why these differences exist, but regardless of the origins, differences in expression have contributed to misunderstandings between Japanese and North American businesspeople. Many Japanese still appear to be some of the least facially expressive of all cultural groups, and persons from other cultures are learning to adapt to this difference.

### Eye Contact and Gaze

...part of facial expression, gaze and eye contact are ...means to be one of the first

## PRIMARYLY NONVERBAL CUES: FACE, EYE CONTACT AND GAZE, SPACE, TOUCH, MOVEMENT AND GESTURE

We're not going to present an exhaustive list of primarily nonverbal cues. For example, we omit appearance and dress, smells, time, and colors; we focus on the following five categories which will give you a broad sense of the most important nonverbal parts of your communicating.

### Expression

Expression is probably the most expressive part of your body and one of the most important focal points for nonverbal communicating. Most of the time, people are aware of how much they rely on faces to give and get information. But facial expression—or reading some of the research—can change your level of understanding. Consider, for example, how important the face is in expressing emotions. An extensive program of research has demonstrated that certain basic emotions are facially expressed in similar ways across cultures.<sup>32</sup> Every culture has so far been found to include some conventional facial expressions for happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, and so on. These are some culture-specific rules for the display of these emotions.

There are some similarities in very similar ways in most cultures. For example, they are expressed in very similar ways by showing photographs of faces. Researchers have discovered these similarities by showing photographs of faces to American faces, for example, to Japanese or preliterate New Guineans to see if they can identify the same emotions. In most cases, members of one culture were able to identify the emotions being expressed by the faces of persons from the other culture.<sup>33</sup> They recognized, for example, that surprise is consistently communicated by a face with widened eyes, head tilted up, raised brow, and open mouth. It is communicated with brows pulled down, wrinkled nose, and a mouth that is communicated with downturned corners.

Raised upper lip and downturned corners of the mouth are similar across cultures, though the facial expression of emotions is similar across cultures and through the facial expression of emotions, for example, between Japanese and Americans. Historically, Japanese have been taught to mask negative emotions with smiles and laughter and to display less facial emotion than Americans. There are a number of competing ideas about why these differences exist, but regardless of the origins, differences in expression have contributed to misunderstandings between Japanese and North American businesspeople. Japanese still appear to be some of the least facially expressive of all cultural groups, and persons from other cultures are learning to adapt to this difference.

### Contact and Gaze

Eye contact is obviously a part of facial expression, gaze and eye contact are important parts of nonverbal communication. Eye contact appears to be one of the first

behaviors that infants develop. Within a few days of birth, infants seem to recognize and attend to the caregiver's eyes. In the weeks immediately after birth, researchers have observed that simply seeing the eyes of the caregiver is enough to produce a smiling reaction.<sup>35</sup> Eye contact also significantly affects development. Infants who lack mutual gaze do not appear to mature perceptually and socially as rapidly as those who experience regular eye contact.<sup>36</sup>

If you doubt the importance of eye contact, consider the inferences you make about someone who doesn't look you in the eye "enough." What "enough" means varies from person to person, and certainly from culture to culture, but most Caucasians in the U.S. infer that the person with too little eye contact is insincere, is disinterested, lacks confidence, is trying to avoid contact, or is lying. There aren't many other possibilities. And all these inferences are negative. Generally, there are no positive messages conveyed by too little eye contact in white U.S. cultures....

One important function of eye gaze is to enhance the intimacy of the relationship. Especially when it is accompanied by forward lean, direct body orientation, and more gesturing, it can help promote closeness.<sup>37</sup> Some intimacy research has studied not sexual contact, but the kind of intimacy that increases the desire to help. Gaze has been found to increase the probability that a bystander will help a person with a medical problem or someone who has fallen.<sup>38</sup> But this phenomenon seems to characterize female-female contacts more than it does those involving males. As Judee Burgoon and her colleagues summarize, "Under some circumstances, prolonged gaze may serve as an affiliative cue in the form of a plea for help, while in other cases it may be seen as overly forward or aggressive behavior."<sup>39</sup>

Another primary function of eye behavior is to express emotions. Some of the same people who studied facial expressions have also researched how people use eyes and eyebrows to interpret the six common emotions. Generally eyes are used more than brows/forehead or lower face for the accurate perception of fear, but eyes help less for the accurate perception of anger and disgust.<sup>40</sup>

Feelings about others are also communicated visually. For example, if you perceive a person as being of significantly lower status than you are, the tendency will be for you to maintain considerable eye contact. On the other hand, communicators tend to look much less at high-status people. Generally, we also look more at people we like and at those who believe as we do. The obvious reason, as Albert Mehrabian explains, is that eye contact is a kind of approach behavior, and approach behaviors are connected with liking.<sup>41</sup> So one response to someone who is appealing is to approach by looking, and one way to avoid a person we dislike is to look away.

We also use gaze and eye behavior to make and influence credibility judgments. Several studies on persuasive effectiveness and willingness to hire a job applicant have underscored the importance of normal or nearly continuous gaze. It appears that gaze avoidance is interpreted negatively, as we mentioned above, and that it can significantly affect your chances of being perceived as credible.<sup>42</sup> This is why those who teach or coach people for public speaking or

interview situations emphasize that speakers and interviewees should generally try to maintain eye contact 50 to 70 percent of the time. As we mentioned earlier, cultural identities affect this formula, but it is a reliable basic guideline for many North American communication situations.

The bottom line is that people give considerable weight to eye behavior and eye contact, because they apparently believe that the eyes are indeed the "windows of the soul." Especially in Western cultures, people are confident that they can spot even the most practiced liar if they can just "look the person in the eye."<sup>43</sup> (although detecting deception is more complicated than this, as we explain below). People are also generally impressed by the confidence and overall effectiveness of a speaker with good eye contact. But since different cultures have different estimates of what constitutes "good" eye contact, it's important not to oversimplify gaze and eye behavior and to remember that, especially because this category of nonverbal cues is given so much credence, it's important to become aware of and to learn to manage your own eye behavior.

### Proximity or Space

You have probably noticed that you often feel possessive about some spaces—perhaps your room, yard, or car—and that you sometimes sit or stand very close to people with whom you're talking and at other times feel more comfortable several feet away. These feelings are related to what is known as *proxemics*, the study of the communicative effects of space or distance.

As [was] said in Chapter 2, space is one of the basic dimensions of every human's world, and the primary tension that describes this dimension is near-far. Because we all have basic human needs both for privacy (distance) and to interdependent (nearness), one way we manage this tension is by defining and defending a *territory*. A territory is an identifiable geographic area that is occupied, controlled, and often defended by a person or group as an exclusive domain.<sup>44</sup> For example, for many North Americans, one's bedroom, or a particular space in a shared room, is yours whether you're in it or not, and one of the reasons is to guard your right to keep it in your preferred state of neatness or disorder and underscore the point that it's your territory. In a library, cafeteria, or other public space, people use overcoats, briefcases, newspapers, food trays, dishes, and utensils to establish a claim over "their" space, even though it's temporary.

A number of studies have identified differences between ways women and men use territory. For example, in most cultures, women have a particular and unviolated room in their homes while many men have dens, studies, or work areas which are off limits to others. Similarly, it appears that more men than

Each of us also lives in our own personal space, a smaller, invisible, portable, "bubble," which we maintain to protect ourselves from physical

situations emphasize that speakers and interviewees should generally maintain eye contact 50 to 70 percent of the time. As we mentioned earlier, cultural identities affect this formula, but it is a reliable basic guideline for most situations.

North American communication situations. The bottom line is that people give considerable weight to eye behavior in social contact, because they apparently believe that the eyes are indeed that window to the soul. Especially in Western cultures, people are confident that they can just "look the person in the eye." Although detecting deception is more complicated than this, as we mentioned earlier, people are also generally impressed by the confidence and openness of a speaker with good eye contact. But since different cultures have different estimates of what constitutes "good" eye contact, it's important to be sensitive to cultural differences in eye behavior and to remember that, especially in cross-cultural situations, this category of nonverbal cues is given so much credence, it's important to become aware of and to learn to manage your own eye behavior.

## Proxemics: Space or Territory

You probably noticed that you often feel possessive about some spaces—your room, yard, or car—and that you sometimes sit or stand very close to people with whom you're talking and at other times feel more comfortable with a larger distance. These feelings are related to what is known as *proxemics*, the study of the communicative effects of space or distance.

Of the communicative effects of space, one of the basic dimensions of every space is its *territory*. [was] said in Chapter 2, space is one of the basic dimensions of every space. It's world, and the primary tension that describes this dimension is nearness or distance. Cause we all have basic human needs both for privacy (distance) and to be close to others (nearness), one way we manage this tension is by defining and managing a territory. A territory is an identifiable geographic area that is occupied, defended, and often defended by a person or group as an exclusive domain.<sup>44</sup> For many North Americans, one's bedroom, or a particular space in a room, is yours whether you're in it or not, and one of the reasons you want to keep it in your preferred state of neatness or disorder is to maintain your right to keep it in your territory. In a library, cafeteria, or other public space, the point is that it's your territory. In a library, cafeteria, or other public space, the point is that it's your territory. In a library, cafeteria, or other public space, the point is that it's your territory.

People use overcoats, briefcases, newspapers, food trays, dishes, and so on to establish a claim over "their" space, even though it's temporary. A number of studies have identified differences between ways women and men use territory. For example, in most cultures, women are allowed less territory than men. As Judy Pearson notes, "Few women have a particular area that is theirs. For men, the territory is often defined by their possessions, or work area, or even a room in their homes while many men have dens, studies, or work areas which are off limits to others. Similarly, it appears that more men than women have particular chairs reserved for their use."<sup>45</sup>

Each of us also lives in our own personal space, a smaller, invisible, portable, adjustable "bubble," which we maintain to protect ourselves from physical threats. The size of this bubble varies; how far away we sit or stand

depends on our family and cultural memberships, the relationship we have with the other person, the situation or the context, and how we are feeling toward the other person at the time. Anthropologist Edward Hall says it this way:

Some individuals never develop the public phase of their personalities and, therefore, cannot fill public spaces; they make very poor speakers or moderators. As many psychiatrists know, other people have trouble with the intimate and personal zones and cannot endure closeness to others.<sup>46</sup>

Within these limitations, Hall identifies four distances he observed among middle-class adults in the northeastern United States. Although the limits of each zone differ from culture to culture, something like these four types of space exist in many cultures.

**Intimate Distance (Contact to 18 Inches)** This zone begins with skin contact and ranges to about a foot and a half. People usually reserve this distance for those to whom they feel emotionally close, and for comforting, protecting, caressing, or lovemaking. When forced into intimate distance with strangers—as on an elevator, for example—people tend to use other nonverbal cues to re-establish separateness. So we avoid eye contact, fold our arms, or perhaps hold a briefcase or purse in front of our body. Allowing someone to enter this zone is a sign of trust; it says we have willingly lowered our defenses. At this distance, not only touch, but also smells, body temperature, and the feel and smell of breath can be part of what we experience. Voices are usually kept at a low level to emphasize the "closed circle" established by intimates.

**Personal Distance (1.5 to 4 Feet)** This is the distance preferred by most conversation partners in a public setting. Typically, subjects of personal interest and moderate involvement can be discussed at this distance. Touch is still possible, but it is limited to brief pats for emphasis and reassurance. Finer details of the other's skin, hair, eyes, and teeth are visible, but one can't discern body temperature or feel the breath.

The far range of this distance is just beyond where you can comfortably touch the other. Hall calls it the distance we can use to keep someone "at arm's length." John sometimes works as a communication consultant training people to do information-gathering interviews. In that context, he encourages the people he's training to try to work within this zone. It appears that three to four feet is far enough away not to threaten the other and yet close enough to encourage the kind of relatively candid responses that make the interviews most successful.

**Social Distance (4 to 12 Feet)** More impersonal business generally is carried out at this distance. People who work together or who are attending a social gathering tend to use the closer ranges of social distance. Salespeople and customers typically are comfortable within the four- to seven-foot zone. Most

people feel uncomfortable if a salesperson approaches within three feet, but five or six feet nonverbally "says," "I'm here to help but I don't want to be pushy."

At the farther ranges of this distance, eye contact becomes especially important. When a person is 10 or 11 feet away, it's easy to be uncertain about who the person is talking with until you can determine where the person is looking. This is also the distance we often use with people of significantly higher or lower status. Sitting at this distance from a superior will tend to create a much more formal conversation than might take place if one or both persons moved their chairs much closer. As a result, it can be more effective to reprimand using social distance and less effective to give praise in this zone.

**Public Distance (12 to 25 Feet)** The closer range of this distance is the one commonly used by instructors and managers addressing work groups. The farthest end of this zone is usually reserved for public speeches. When communicating at this distance, voices need to be loud or electronically amplified. At the farther ranges of this distance, facial expression, movements, and gestures also need to be exaggerated in order to be meaningful.

Like many other general observations about human communication, these four distances need to be taken with a grain of salt. Several studies have shown, for example, that females sit and stand closer together than do males, and that mixed-sex pairs consistently adopt closer distances than do male-male pairs.<sup>47</sup> Interpersonal distance also generally increases with age from preschool and grade school through the teen years to adulthood, but this tendency is mitigated somewhat by the fact that people also tend to adopt closer distances with age peers than with those who are younger or older.<sup>48</sup> So people's interpretations of distance and closeness may depend not only on their cultural identity, but also on their gender and age and on the gender and age of the person with whom they're conversing.

Space is usually interpreted in the context of other nonverbal cues. For example, a Chinese-American student reported:

[My grandfather] commands his presence with silence, limited facial expressions and lots of space between himself and others. I have never thought of jumping into his lap like O' St. Nick or even felt comfortable talking to him at any great length. When I do scrounge up the courage to speak to him, it is almost always to greet him or ask him to come to dinner. The speech used would have to be laden with respectful words.<sup>49</sup>

## Touch

Touch is the most direct way that humans establish the contact that makes us who we are. "It is well documented that touch is essential to the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of human infants and to their intellectual, social, and communication development."<sup>50</sup> Touch is equally important for adults, although in many Western cultures make it much more difficult to accomplish.

Part I Four

feel uncomfortable if a salesperson approaches within three feet, but five feet nonverbally," says, "I'm here to help but I don't want to be pushy." The farther ranges of this distance, eye contact becomes especially important. When a person is 10 or 11 feet away, it's easy to be uncertain about who the person is looking. This is talking with until you can determine where the person is looking or lower the distance we often use with people of significantly higher or lower. Sitting at this distance from a superior will tend to create a much more 1 conversation than might take place if one or both persons moved social much closer. As a result, it can be more effective to reprimand using social ice and less effective to give praise in this zone.

4.5 is distance is the one com-

**ic Distance (12 to 25 Feet)** The closer range of this distance is used by instructors and managers addressing work groups. The farthest part of this zone is usually reserved for public speeches. At the farther end of this zone, voices need to be loud or electronically amplified. As distance decreases, voices need to be louder or more expressive. Facial expression, body movement, and gestures also need to be more pronounced as distance decreases. In addition, as distance decreases, the amount of nonverbal communication increases. As distance decreases, the amount of verbal communication decreases.

[illegible]

Space is usually interpreted in the context of the student reported:

Space is usually interpreted as a Chinese-American student reported, for example, a Chinese-American student reported, "My grandfather] commands his presence with silence, limited facial expressions and lots of space between himself and others. I have never thought of jumping into his lap like Ol' St. Nick or even felt comfortable talking to him at any great length. When I do scrounge up the courage to speak to him, it is almost always to greet him or ask him to come to dinner. The speech used would have to be laden with respectful words."

## Touch

## Touch

Touch is the most direct way that humans establish the contact that makes us who we are. "It is well documented that touch is essential to the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of human infants and to their intellectual, social, and communication development."<sup>50</sup> Touch is equally important for adults, although much more difficult to accomplish. "I make it much more difficult to accomplish."

"I'm starved."

Touch plays a part in just about every activity of our waking day—not just with other humans but also with objects. You may not be aware of the feel of your clothes; the chair, couch, or floor on which you're sitting, standing, or lying; or the feel of the book you're holding, the pencil or pen you're grasping, or the shoes you're wearing. But you couldn't write, walk, make a fist, smile, or comb your hair without the sense of touch. In addition, the ways in which we hold and handle such things as books, pencils, cups or glasses, and purses or briefcases can affect another person's responses to us.

Touch between persons is even more complex. Stan Jones and Elaine Yarbrough, two speech communication researchers, found that people touch to indicate positive feelings, to play, to control, as part of a greeting or departure ritual, to help accomplish a task, to combine greeting or departure with affection, and accidentally.<sup>51</sup> In their studies, control touches occurred most frequently, touches that were primarily interpreted to mean a request for compliance or attention getting. A spot touch with the hand to a nonvulnerable body part—hands, arms, shoulders, or upper back—frequently accompanies and emphasizes such statements as, "Move over," "Hurry up," "Stay here," "Be serious," and "Do it." A similar touch reinforces such messages as, "Listen to this," "Look at that," and "I want your attention." These touches are almost always accompanied by verbalization, and both sexes initiate these touches with almost equal frequency.

Positive affect touches were the second most frequent kind of touch Jones and Yarbrough observed. The highest number of these touches were expressions of affection. As you would expect, these occur predominantly in close relationships and include hugs, kisses, and often contacts with "vulnerable body parts"—head, neck, torso, lower back, buttocks, legs, or feet. But affection can also be communicated by touch in some business settings. Long-term work teams sometimes engage in spontaneous brief touches among team members that are interpreted as positive and supportive. On the other hand, ... sexual harassment in the workplace often consists in part of inappropriate or manipulative positive affect touching.

Research such as that of Jones and Yarbrough is important because it helps us comprehend a poorly understood, and sometimes even feared, aspect of our communicating. As Mark Knapp says:

Some people grow up learning "not to touch" a multitude of animate and inanimate objects; they are told not to touch their own body and later not to touch the body of their dating partner; care is taken so children do not see their parents "touch" one another intimately; some parents demonstrate a noncontact norm through the use of twin beds; touching is associated with admonitions of "not nice" or "bad" and is punished accordingly—and frequent touching between father and son is thought to be something less than masculine.<sup>52</sup>

We know that touch is an enormously powerful kind of nonverbal communication, a very small amount of it can say a great deal. We can harness this power by becoming aware of how touch affects where our communication is on the social-cultural-interpersonal scale.



## Post and Gestures

**Posture and Gestures**

[illegible][illegible]

vements of independence and submission posturally. A male toward the door, the other may sit down or even try to keep away from the door. People also communicate dominance and submission posturally hook his thumbs in his belt and both females and males may stand with hands on hips in the akimbo position. When a seated person leans back with hands clasped behind her or his head, this is typically another dominance posture. When a conversational group of three is approached by a fourth person, the third typically rotate their bodies out to encourage the fourth to join them or in some cases to leave him or her.

## Chapter 4 Verbal and Nonverbal Contact

leaning backward and away from them as having a more negative attitude than one who was leaning forward."<sup>55</sup> A direct vis-à-vis posture, movement toward the other, affirmative head nods, expressive hand gestures, and stretching are all rated as "warm" behaviors, while moving away, picking one's teeth, shaking the head, and playing with hair are rated as "cold."<sup>56</sup> All of these descriptions illustrate how body movement and gesture make up still another important category of nonverbal behaviors.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. To check your understanding of the relationship between verbal and nonverbal cues, itemize six nonverbal features of the words you find in this book.
2. Explain what it means to say that words are "arbitrary symbols."
3. What's the problem with an explanation of language based on an analysis of concrete nouns?
4. What's missing, according to Stewart and Logan, from the account of language as an activity?
5. Explain the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in your own words.
6. Give an example from your own experience of gendered (masculine/feminine) language affecting your perception of someone or something.
7. What are paralinguistics?
8. Especially in conversation, silence, this reading argues, is much more than the absence of noise. Explain.
9. Why is facial expression discussed in two separate places in this reading?
10. What are interactive gestures?
11. What makes eye behavior so important in conversations?
12. Stewart and Logan make the point that a very small amount of touch can "say" a great deal. Which other mixed and primarily nonverbal cues are similarly high in potency—where a little can go a long way?

## PROBES

1. Carole and I explain some disadvantages of separate discussions of verbal and nonverbal cues. What are some advantages?
2. When does it most seem as if language is a "system"? When does this label seem least appropriate?
3. One famous author expressed something very close to the "language is a soup" idea in these words: "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." With the "soup" metaphor in mind, explain what you believe that means.
4. Carole and I repeat the claims about the differences between masculine and feminine communication styles that have been popularized by some authors. Malcolm Parks's reading in Chapter 8 challenges these claims. Flip forward in the book to Chapter 8, and make a note there to discuss whether you agree with this reading or that one.