

BODDY LANGUAGE

Nonverbal cues create conversations

By DEBBI SYKES

he didn't want him to walk her home from the
ke, Jill playfully brushed her hair from her face
ng, sideways look.

ut her smile didn't reach his eyes.
eir words or their actions?
ody language as a valuable source of informa-
ersedes what a person says. Through observa-
n more about others and perhaps enhance the
ive them.

studied body language for more than 30 years,
absolute rules. Mannerisms vary widely, espec-
es, and they do not fit into neat categories. Cir-
not be disregarded either.

sses her arms? Some people might say she is be-
t maybe she is chilly or that is a comfortable

tant is the impression that we give others. Peo-
verbal cues subconsciously. Without realizing
out ourselves.

e researchers have observed rules common to
ations, such as on buses and sidewalks and
nd conversing.

States, touching is not considered socially ap-
pple in crowded buses tense their muscles and
ainst other passengers. When people do touch
y smile as if to apologize.

ulate their eyes as carefully as their arms and
ring is taboo. They usually look at an advertise-
or stare blindly out the windows—never at pas-
on does look at someone, he must do it furtively
to look away quickly.

tions have their own rules.

approach one another they may look at one
ey are about eight feet apart. Then they look
aring is rude. When passing, people usually look
they are walking, as if to signal which way they

are going. This way, they avoid the embarrassment of sidestep-
ping—the dance that takes place when two people can not
decide which route to take around one another.

When students stop to chat on a sidewalk, the area becomes
their territory temporarily. Others seem to recognize this by low-
ering their heads as they walk by.

Courting behaviors reveal interest in someone.

Let us look at Mark and Jill again. When they smooth their hair,
adjust their clothing and stand straighter, they are showing that
they are attracted to one another. When they sit together to talk,
they cross their legs toward one another and lean in the other's
direction.

*Through observation we can learn
more about others and perhaps
enhance the impressions we give
them.*

What if Jill toys with her necklace while they are talking? Body
language researchers might say she is unconsciously using the
necklace as a substitute for Mark. What does it mean if Mark
shows his palms a lot in gesturing? These experts would say it is a
sign of his attraction for Jill.

Julius Fast, an expert on body language, believes that attrac-
tion can even cause the glow that supposedly comes from love.
During courting, people straighten their posture, tighten their
muscles and their faces flush, making appear more attractive.

Dr. Adam Kendon, a psychologist, notes a similarity between
human and animal courtship. At first, the partners flaunt their
sexuality to attract the other and then, after succeeding, act coy-
ly like a child, or the young. Kendon thinks this may be a way to
reassure the partner that he won't hurt him.

But we must view these body language cues cautiously. Some-
times people seem to be courting in nonsexual situations such as
with teachers or parents. Flora Davis, a journalist who has written

about body language, points out that people use disclaimers
when they are truly courting. For example, a person may tap his
wedding ring while talking or two people may turn slightly away
when sitting together.

The body language of conversation is fairly simple to detect.
When two people talk, the speaker usually looks away frequently
while the listener looks at him. Fast thinks the speaker looks
away to avoid being distracted and interrupted. But the speaker
does glance at his listener occasionally to make sure he is listen-
ing. When he finishes talking, he looks at the listener to signal
that it is his turn to talk.

A good cue to follow when you want someone to talk is to
look toward him frequently. Eventually this should encourage
him to say something. When you imitate the body language of a
speaker while listening, you reassure him by showing your agree-
ment. Conversely, you can also avoid interruptions by looking
away.

There are even gender differences in the body language of
conversations. Davis mentions experiments conducted by Ralph
Exline, a psychologist at the University of Delaware. Exline
found that women do more looking at their listeners when talk-
ing, while men do more looking when they are listening. Davis
speculates that it is more important for women to see the emo-
tional responses to what they say than it is for men. Women talk
less when they can't see their partner, while men talk more,
Davis says.

Where you sit in classrooms also reveals something about
you. Students feel possessive about their seats after the first days
of classes. Students who sit at the back and the ends of a class-
room want to be anonymous, Fast says. These students may be
shy or may resent having to take the course. Those sitting in the
front, center and back usually participate more. Students sitting
in the front really are better students, he says.

But classroom body language needs qualification, too. Just
because the students in a small class are clustered near the door
doesn't mean they are anxious to leave. They may have been too
embarrassed to cross the room and spread out in the first days of
class.

Body language researchers also study the variations in
space that people keep between themselves. This study, proxi-
emics, has shown that everyone seems to have an
imaginary bubble of space around him. Trespassers who
intrude its boundaries make him feel uncomfortable. This
bubble ranges tremendously in size.

For example, Fast notes that Arabs generally enjoy be-
ing close to others, while Britons prefer to keep greater
distances. People who don't understand these differences
may be insulted.

Individuals within the same culture can vary as well.
Women seem to enjoy crowding more than men do,
Davis says. While men may become combative in a
crowd, women become more friendly, she says.

This space bubble also varies over time for each per-
son. Your need for space shrinks when you are in love or



go to a bar or nightclub expecting to find crowds, Fast says.
Alcohol can exaggerate these spatial needs.

People also have different ways to order their space. While an
Arab tends to withdraw into himself when he wants to be alone
with his thoughts, a European often retreats into another room,
Fast says. An American typically goes off by himself.

Body language also varies with geography. For example, the
South is a high-smile area compared with the Northeast, Davis
says. A Southerner who seldom smiles is as suspect as a North-
erner who smiles a great deal. Regions also affect the rate of
learning body language. Research has shown that Southern chil-
dren learn gender signals about age 4, while those living in the
Northeast learn them later. An example of a gender signal is sit-
ting positions. American girls learn to sit with their legs close to-
gether, while boys learn to sit with their legs farther apart, often
propping one leg on the other knee.

It is important to remember these variations in one another
and to be sensitive to what body language can convey. It can be
an important tool for deciphering the unspoken messages be-
hind words. Body language can't tell us everything, but we may
be missing a wealth of silent clues if we overlook them.

If Mark had watched Jill's body language, he would have
known that Jill really was attracted to him. If Jill had watched
Mark more closely, she would have realized that she needed to be
direct.

With body language, maybe they could find a happy ending.

Debbi Sykes is a staff writer for The Daily Tar Heel.

