

Proxemics: Some Challenges and Strategies in Nonverbal Communication

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The term ‘proxemics’ refers to the study of spatial dimension of nonverbal behavior. The understanding of occupation, cultivation, preservation and utilization of the four levels of space, with respect to the relative cultural levels, shall help one comprehend the proxemic behavior of an individual, and thus of a culture. The knowledge and application of certain skills related to proxemics have become very important today. This paper discusses some of the characteristics of proxemics, approaches in the study of proxemic behavior of an individual and culture, and also some of the strategies to be employed to make use of proxemics for effective communication.

He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every single pore.

– Sigmund Freud (1953)

(“Fragment of an Analysis of Hysteria”)

Introduction

Critics laud the brilliance of Shakespeare’s (2002) imagination when he made his Romeo sing of Juliet: “She speaks, yet she says nothing; what of that?/Her eye discourses, I will answer it” (*Romeo and Juliet*, p. 40). They also cherish the Homeric elegance and Goethean beauty that sing in its voluminous pages the significance of the emotions that accompany the voices of their characters. However, it is not the beauty or the theatricality involved in nonverbal communication, but the very essentiality of the comprehension of the meaning that makes the nonverbal cues indispensable in a customary conversation. When the nonverbal signal is understood, its message, paired with the lexical context, makes the interpretation of the sender’s meaning complete.

The significant role played by nonverbal communication in a society has been discussed from a variety of perspectives. Harrison and Crouch (1972) suggest that “in the development of each human being, nonverbal communication precedes and perhaps structures all subsequent communication” (p. 77). While commenting on the

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significance of nonverbal communication in the evolution of human language, Nolan (1975) notes that “nonverbal behavior precedes verbal behavior in the evolution of communication” (p. 101). Mehrabian (1968) gave a different dimension to the researches involved in the nonverbal communication. With his experiments, he was able to give “specific relative values for (each) components of a communication” (Smith, 1979, p. 632). Mehrabian (1971) further opines that “total impact (in the listener) = [0.07 verbal + 0.38 vocal + 0.55 non verbal] (of the speaker)” (p. 53). Later he suggests that “total liking or feeling = 7% verbal liking or feeling + 38% vocal liking or feeling + 55% facial liking or feeling” (p. 44). Thus, he gives primary importance to the nonverbal communication, to be specific of the facial expressions for the likability of a particular person during the process of communication. Although studies based on other settings have reached different conclusions regarding the relative weights of verbal and nonverbal messages, the importance of the nonverbal domain for communicative purposes apparently remains beyond any doubts.

In an attempt to understand the various aspects of nonverbal communication, some of the experts brought in various classifications regarding the types, factors and influences of the nonverbal communication. Cook (1971) divides the nonverbal cues into two broad categories, namely—(1) Static nonverbal cues, which are related to face, physique, voice, clothes, makeup and so on and (2) Dynamic nonverbal cues, which are related to gestures, facial expressions, gaze direction, space, distance, tone of voice and amount and fluency of speech.

Knapp (1971), an expert in the field of nonverbal communication, makes yet another classification of nonverbal communication:

- Environmental Factors: Which consist of elements such as furniture, architectural style, lighting, smells, colors and temperature;
- Proxemics: Which is defined as the use and perception of one's social and personal space, such as in seating and spatial arrangements, territoriality and conversational distance and orientation;
- Kinesics: Which is defined as body motions that include gestures, body movements, postures, facial and eye behaviors and the movement of other body parts;
- Touching Behavior: Which consists of physical contact;
- Physical Characteristics: Which comprise personal characteristics such as physique, breath odor, height, weight, hair and skin color;
- Paralanguage: Which consists of nonverbal vocal cues surrounding speech, such as pitch, volume, tempo and intensity of the voice; and
- Artifacts: Which are the manipulated objects in contact with the interacting persons such as perfume, clothes, lipstick, hair pieces, eyeglasses and miscellaneous beauty aids.

With the advent of interdisciplinary approach in researches in humanities, the ideas of psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists, linguists, law and enforcement experts, specialists in pedagogy and experts in various other fields together began to shape the methodology of research in the studies related to nonverbal communication. Among the seven different factors mentioned above, proxemics has attracted much attention among the researchers for the possibility of immense amount of interdisciplinary researches. Proxemics, a multidimensional field, has several impacts: that of the culture, psychology of the individual, spatial and seating arrangements, architecture and so on. The knowledge of the proxemic behavior becomes an indispensable field of study, as it adds a wider approach to the study of nonverbal communication.

This paper studies some of the characteristics of proxemics, approaches in the study of proxemic behavior of an individual and a culture, and also some strategies to be employed to make use of the proxemics for effective communication.

Hall (1963, p.122), the founding father of proxemics, defines the term ‘proxemics’ as “the spatial dimension of nonverbal behavior” (p. 122). The ideas of Hall were quite revolutionary during his period. With his expertise in the fields like anthropology, enculturation and psychology, Hall gave a new dimension to the study of nonverbal communication. In the words of Blyth (1976), “Hall sets forth a theory about how people react to others at various distances from their own bodies, indicating thereby a sense of territoriality, similar to that shown by animals or birds and develops notation for this purpose” (p. 117).

With the influence of Hall, the proxemic researches are now primarily based on the concept of territoriality. Proxemics therefore has become the study of the means in which individuals make use of the physical space in the interaction between the individuals. For Hall, each organism in a way tries to occupy, cultivate, preserve and utilize space and therefore a territory. The process of occupation, cultivation, preservation and utilization of space varies from culture to culture. To understand the proxemic behavior of different cultures, the experts have classified the idea of space into four different categories,

1. Public Space: This area is about 12 ft to 25 ft with the individual at its center. It is the domain of public interactions such as walking in a street or passing by a stranger in a supermarket.
2. Social Space: This area is about 4 ft to 12 ft with the individual at its center. It is the domain of interactions such as meeting someone new, greeting a familiar acquaintance, or generally interacting with someone who is not particularly well known.
3. Personal Space: This area is about 18 inches to 4 ft with the individual at its center. It is the domain of interaction with someone who is known very well. This space is also called ‘bubble’ and it varies in different cultures.

4. Intimate Space: This area is about a few inches to about 18 inches with the individual at its center. This is the most intimate interaction with people whom one is very familiar with.

At a cultural level, the proxemic behavior is analyzed by the study of the amount of occupation, cultivation, preservation and utilization of these different levels of spaces. Commenting on the proxemic behavior of the Americans, Hall (1971, p. 45) writes that "in America as soon as a person stops or is seated in a public place, there balloons around him a small sphere of privacy which is considered inviolable". However, some of the critics of Hall called this method of study of proxemics more generalized and stereotyping. For his ideas, especially regarding the occupation, cultivation, preservation and utilization of space by the people from countries like India, Hall was much criticized.

Later, Hall (1963) answers his critics by way of further classification of levels of proxemics. He classifies proxemics into three levels:

1. Infracultural Level: Which is concerned with spatial behavior that underlies culture and has its base in man's phylogenetic (study of evolutionary relatedness among various groups of organisms) past;
2. Precultural Level: Which is concerned with how man uses his senses in the perception of space; and
3. Microcultural Level: Which deals with the structuring of space as it is modified by the effects of culture.

The understanding of occupation, cultivation, preservation and utilization of the four levels of space and thus the territory with respect to these cultural levels shall help one to comprehend the proxemic behavior of an individual and also that of a culture. The advent of this new dimension of understanding of the proxemic behavior helped to question the stereotyped proxemic behaviors of a culture. For example, as a result of this, the fact that the occupation of personal space of an Indian female by a male who is either a doctor, or a bangle seller, or a salesman of shoes or jewels is accepted as not contemptible, has been admitted among the western researchers.

Hall later identified eight variables of proxemic behavior as an extension of the research. Understanding these dimensions helps one to enhance the ability to read the proxemic behavior of an individual participant in an interaction. They are:

1. Postural-Sex Identifiers: Which refer to the influence of postural status and sex identities of the participants in an interaction with reference to space.
2. Sociofugal-SocioPETAL Axis: Which refers to the positioning of the shoulders and face with reference to space during the conversation. There are nine primary orientations: face-to-face, 45°, 90°, 135°, 180°, 135°, 90°, 45° and back-to-back. The effects of these orientations are used either to encourage or discourage communication.
3. Kinesthetic Factor: Which refers to different distances between persons that provide a capability for touching one another.

4. Touch Code: Which is a behavioral category that deals with how participants are touching one another, such as caressing, holding, feeling, prolonged holding, spot touching, pressing against, accidental brushing, or not touching at all.
5. Visual Code: Which refers to the amount of eye contact.
6. Voice Loudness: Which refers to the loudness of the voice with reference to the space.
7. Thermal Code: Which refers to the heat transmitted by a human body.
8. Olfaction Code: Which refers to the presence and degree of breath and body odors.

A careful study of these factors suggests that not all these factors are of equal complexity or magnitude and that not all the eight factors can be expected to be present at the same time in an interaction. However, reading of these factors with reference to the four cultural levels of space regarding the occupation, cultivation, preservation and utilization of space among the participants during an interaction can provide significant details regarding the nonverbal aspect of communication.

Yet another dimension of the proxemics is the study of the space and the influence of the objects and infrastructure to understand the status and nature of a person involved in the study. Regarding this, Kevin Hogan (2003) divides the space into three categories,

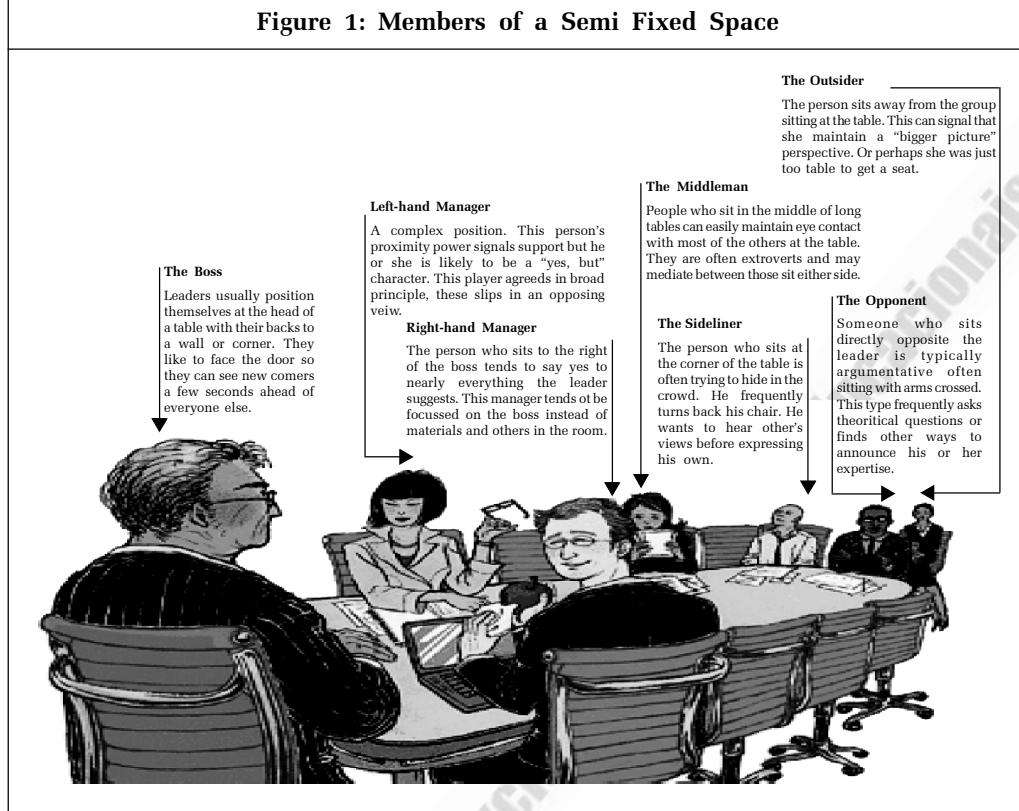
1. Fixed-Feature Space: Which refers to the organization of space by unmoving boundaries like rooms in houses or buildings;
2. Semi-Fixed Space: Which refers to the arrangement of moveable objects like tables, chairs and other furniture; and
3. Informal Space: Which refers to the private space.

The owner of the fixed-feature space has an overwhelming advantage in the communication process and that there is a certain advantage that one can enjoy in his own territory. It has to be noted here that one builds his boundaries and also positions the infrastructures to his own advantages.

In semi-fixed space, however, the objects are already fixed and the position of the objects and the space resulted provide details on the nature of the interaction as well as the status of the participants. For example, in the following picture (Figure 1), the position of the seat of the boss enables him to have a look at all the participants and his command is felt by virtue of the position of his seat. The one who is sitting on the right side of the boss is next in command to him and the one who is on the left is positioned next to the manager. The one who is sitting opposite to the boss is his opponent and the one who is sitting in the middle is the agent. The one who is sitting with no relation to the space produced by the table is the outsider and eventually has little impact on the communication process.

The experts in the field of proxemics claim that the best position to have better conversation is that of the boss and the left hand manager because of the position of the seat. And the most difficult position is that of the left hand manager and the middleman because of the direction, which is nearly 180° to her left.

Figure 1: Members of a Semi Fixed Space



The influence of proxemics extends to the field of education too. Researches on the classroom designs and the seating arrangements have made tremendous impact on the process of learning. For example, the traditional method of classroom arrangement is analyzed by experts and is found to be having much disadvantage to the process of learning due to the large amount of space that exists between the teacher and the students, especially the students in the last row.

The researchers have introduced various other classroom arrangements for a better learning process. They introduced horseshoe seating arrangements, where the space between the teacher and the students is much reduced.

The recent studies in the proxemics have resulted in the positioning of seats in the classroom for an effective teaching process as a group. The positioning of seats into small groups helps the students have a better interaction with each other and with the staff as well, during discussion. The reduction of space helps learning to emerge as an effective process.

Conclusion

This paper stresses the importance of researches in the field. As mentioned by Mark Baldassare and Susan Feller (1975, p. 496), "the field of proxemics has lived with a myth

for a decade”, and that further researches in the field alone can dispel those myths. Proxemics is a subtle process which involves “structural and contextual features” (Mark and Susan (1975), and an explicit categorization of environmental, social and situational variables within each research setting will be important in future studies. Especially in a country like India, where the role of space in social, cultural and economic levels plays a significant role, researches in the field of proxemics have to be encouraged widely. ‘The proxemics’, as suggested by Hall, “is the hidden dimension of human culture which we practice unconsciously all the time”, and the study of the spaces will definitely be a study of culture at a unique level.◎

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Reference # 50J-2010-09-01-01

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Fonte: IUP Journal of Soft Skills, v. 4, n. 3, p. 7-14, 2010. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://web.ebscohost.com>>. Acesso em: 9 dez. 2010.