

Speaking Skills (1) - Kinds of Gestures

All gestures are not the same. There are at least four types of gesture.

One is like a word. Such a gesture has a meaning that is distinct and arbitrary. An example is 'thumbs up'. We use this sign in the same way that we use a word. Desmond Morris studied 20 gestures of this type, mapping their meaning and form across Europe. Some cultures use signs more than others. The most developed systems of word-like gestures are found in deaf sign languages. These are true languages where all the words and grammar are carried by gestures.

Another type of gesture is the illustration. When I say 'that house' and point at a particular house or I play-act some scene while describing the action, I am not using the gestures as words but as a sort of picture. Picture-like gestures are used to save on long boring explanations or to add colour and drama to a story. The peak of this type of gesture is found in the art of mime.

The third type of gesture is the emotional indicator. If I am angry, I will express that anger in gestures like banging a fist on the table. If I want to express sincerity, I might touch my heart with my hand. Most people use these gestures unconsciously, with gestures that are innate. But, they can also be learnt or exaggerated by public speakers. These gestures along with the equivalent emotional indicators in our posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice are a non-verbal signalling system that is akin to communication in animals. It is how our dogs understand us as well as adding context to the words we use among ourselves. They are part of the bag of tricks used by good actors.

Finally, there are gestures that are called baton gestures. They beat out the rhythm of speech. We often do not notice that this is being done. It is usually even more unconscious than the emotional gestures. Speeded up film of speakers shows the baton action of their hands and head movements and that listeners start to move, themselves, in tiny ways in unison with the speaker's baton gestures. Listeners are helped by these gestures to know when one verbal phrase is ending and another beginning. This simplifies the processing of the language for the listener. Good, natural baton gestures can protect your audience from fatigue.

- The 'fingertips together' gesture appears to indicate that the speaker is thinking/speaking in a very precise way. It is like the dexterity of the hands were used as a metaphor for accuracy of speech. It seems that there is some sort of connection between the hand and the tongue. Not only do we touch our finger tips together when we are being very careful with our words, but we move our tongue on our lips when we are concentrating on doing something difficult with our hands.

- The 'pointing' gesture is used much more by men than women. It seems that pointing directly at an audience while speaking is an aggressive gesture. Maybe that is why you rarely see it except in heated debate among men.

- 'Palm up' gestures are protective and so seem to imply vulnerability, exposure of thought, honesty, sincerity. They are part of a complex of gestures and postures that stem from curling up and protecting the face with the hands. 'Palm down' gestures arise from rearing up and looking as big and menacing as possible - a complex of gestures and postures called 'anti-gravity'. It seems to imply aggression, determination, importance of the words, force of expression.

Janet

Speaking Skills (2) - Eye contact

Here are some aspects of eye contact for you to consider.

- How do you know that someone is talking to you? Often it is because they look at you. In fact, if they cannot look at you, they often say something like, 'Janet, listen to this.' If someone is talking and never glances at you, you do not feel included in the conversation. Further, if someone looks at you but not into your eyes, the message can be not only that you are excluded but that you are the object of disdain. These feelings are almost automatic. A listener may not realize why they feel they are not being addressed but feel left out all the same. When you look someone in the eye you signal that you are talking to them as more or less an equal, a valued listener.
- Another thing that happens when you make eye contact is that you communicate more and better, yourself. Have you ever tried to talk to someone that is not looking at you? It is difficult to speak normally. It makes people nervous and stilted. Sometimes people just dry up completely. So if you are addressing a group and you look at the ceiling, your notes, or the wall at the back of the room, your communication will lack much of its effectiveness. You will vary your voice less, move less, make less facial expressions and generally appear wooden. Somehow your mind just revolts at communicating with painted plaster.
- Eye contact is needed to monitor the audience. Have you even been talking to someone and had the 'blinds come down' in their eyes? They are lost and not listening. Either they cannot understand, or they are having a very negative emotional response. Have you even noticed someone looking intently, not at you, but at some point in space? Their mind has wandered and they are not longer hearing you. If people are interested and taking in what you say, it shows in their eyes.
- Communication is difficult for both the speaker and the listener unless they can and do look into one another's eyes. But not for too long at a time! It makes people uncomfortable if they are stared at for any length of time. Your eyes should neither flit pass people nor remain fixed on them for a long time. The length of time that is comfortable is a cultural thing. It also has to do with the number of people and how well you know them. If you are sensitive to it, you, yourself, will notice being uncomfortable if you look at someone too long. Also you may notice the listeners' eyes flick away if they are uncomfortable.
- Move your eyes naturally between phrases rather than in the middle of a phrase. So, in a simple sentence, you might look at one person for the subject and another for the predicate.
- With practice you can make good eye contact when reading but it can never be as natural as the eye contact that you can make when speaking without notes.

Janet

Speaking Skills (3) - A Speech to Remember

If you cannot remember what you want to say, then can you expect the audience to remember what you have said? A well structured speech is easier to remember, for both the speaker and the listener.

I use four rules of thumb myself. The first is the opening-body-conclusion overall pattern or the say what your going to say, say it, and say what you said model. It is easier for the audience to understand what is being said if it is expected rather than surprising them. It is easier for the speaker to make sure that they are going to deliver, if they can review what is going to happen at the beginning and summarize it at the end.

A friend pointed out that you can construct a speech of smaller speeches. So you do an opening, then you do the first part of your body. That first point can be considered as a little speech and it can have an opening-body-conclusion. Then you can go on to the second part of the body, again a mini-speech. After the body is done, the conclusion to the whole speech is given. In fact you can do this at every level. A long opening can itself be constructed as an O-B-C. A point in the body can have sub-points and therefore carry the O-B-C pattern. A 2 minute speech has a simple O-B-C structure, a 10 minute speech can have each part of the body as its own mini speech, a 45 minute speech can have the opening, the conclusion and each part of each part of the body as a mini speech. In this hierarchy, you are always giving a short speech and the relationships between the ideas are always clear and announced ahead. This helps both the speaker and the listener from getting lost.

The points or parts of the body need to have some logic. They can be illustrative examples; they can be a list of causes or a list of outcomes; they can be a history; they can be a path. The point is that if one follows another, you will remember the order and not miss any and the listener will be able to recall them later. It never hurts to make the logic plain - tell the audience what your logic is and name or number the parts. The more naturally and logically the body of the speech is constructed, the better the speech will be. It will be more convincing and memorable.

Finally, only so many items can be held in the mind at once. Depending on the situation this number is between 3 and 7. You may be able to remember 7 items but you can bet that many people in the audience are going to have trouble with more than 3. If you need more than 3 or 4 parts to an idea, divide it differently, re-think it, make a hierarchy like 2 groups of 3 each. In the nervousness of giving a speech, you may have difficulty yourself with trying to remember too many parts. With the distractions that the audience experiences, they will have difficulty with too many parts.

So to speak without notes (or with only a short reminder card) and have the audience remember what you say, you only need to master the mini-speech and carefully combine a group of mini-speeches in a clearly logical pattern.

Janet

Speaking Skills (4) - Audio-Visual Aids & Handouts , the Two-edged Sword

I have heard people say, 'Never use AV unless you have to.' I have also heard people say, 'If you can, enrich your presentation with AV.' In my opinion, they are both right and both wrong. Audio-visual aids are powerful aids but have to be used with care.

People are not good at doing two things at once. We cannot read and listen at the same time. If you give an audience a lot of reading material either as handouts or on a screen, you will find that half of them stop listening to anything you say. In fact, in those situations where you want to work from a handout or work through a workbook or record discussion on a flip chart or the like, you have to give instructions to the audience on when they should be reading and when they should be listening. Using these aids can be invaluable in training presentations but care is required. In training sessions it is sometimes helpful to give out notes so that trainees are listening rather than writing furiously. But you need to make it clear that they are to be read later or you will defeat your purpose.

People also cannot follow two paths at once. The greatest chaos can result from saying one thing and showing another. If the pages in a handout have a different order than the speaker's points, you will hear a desperate shuffling of paper and whispering about which page to go to. The audience can also be distracted if it is given material that is not covered by the speaker. Material that is shown to the audience should be covered by the speaker in the same order and level of detail, otherwise it should be given after the speech. Detailed handouts to take with them are useful to the audience, but not if they interfere with listening. Handouts should not be passed out during a speech - they should either be put at each place ahead of time or passed out after the speech is over. People are not looking at you if they are looking at your AV. Your facial expressions and gestures are missed and you cannot make eye contact. There is a limit to what you can do in this situation. On the other hand you do have the power of the visual.

With an audience of seniors, some of which cannot hear and others who cannot see, the combination of visuals and speech is more effective than either alone. They of course need to be in sync.

You also have to worry about the effects of dim lights, distracting light sources, sitting awkwardly to see a screen and such like problems.

Bringing an object or a picture can add a great deal to a speech but the passing around is disruptive. You have to judge which is more important in any situation.

It can be very boring to explain some things verbally, that are very interesting when presented as a picture, graph, diagram or map. If AV is created to be a pleasure to look at, informative and integrated into the presentation ; if it is not over used, then it can add greatly to a speech.

Janet

Speaking Skills (5) - **Saying it**

Oral and written language are different. This is why you can often tell whether a person is reading or speaking off-the-cuff, even when you cannot see them (on radio for example).

- The vocabulary differs. The oral vocabulary is somewhat simpler. The words tend to be the shorter, commoner words. But we do have words in our vocabulary that we use in speaking but not writing, as well as the other way around. We may even be unsure of their spelling. It interrupts our speech to carefully weigh which word to use but it hardly slows down our writing.
- The grammar also differs. Spoken grammar is noticeably simpler. There are fewer clauses; sentences tend to be shorter. This is because simpler structures are faster to produce and easier to understand. The listener will not get the meaning if the sentence misleads him about that is the main subject and verb. If you misunderstand a sentence you read, you can re-read it. A missed verbal idea is gone. These are differences of degree - nothing that is said cannot be written and vice versa.
- Style differs greatly. For example, good written style frowns on duplication and repetition while good oral style encourages them. I might write, 'I went to the neighbours, corner store and park.' But I would say, 'I went to the neighbours, I went to the corner store, and then I went to the park.' It looks worst but it sounds better. The words we pick when we speak are influenced more by sound. In this respect oral language and poetry are similar in their fondness for rhyming words, alliterative words (same starting sound), and vowel correspondences. Prose writers worry about different aspects.
- Oral language is related to poetry in another way: it is rhythmic. The rhythm of speech is called cadence. The speaker and listener must share a sense of this cadence in order for the string of words to be organized into self-contained packets of meaning. If the length of these packets is predictable and never too long then both speaking and listening is easier. Except for some very notable writers, prose is not rhythmic. It doesn't carry the normal verbal cadence of the language.
- The greatest difference between oral and written language is the amount of the meaning that is carried, not by words, but by gestures, posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice. The non-verbal communication pathways mean that the words are simply less important and can be used in a freer way. For example, it is very easy to be sarcastic when speaking, but takes hard work in writing. Humour, gravity, conviction etc. are easier to express when speaking. The significance of non-verbal communication can hardly be overstated (and may be as high as 90% of the meaning in some situations).

Janet

Speaking Skills (6) - Voice

Music has the ability to convey emotion directly. There is sad music, happy music, stirring music, solemn music etc. To a large extent this is independent of the culture. It seems to rely on the sound envelop - the shape of the sound's pitch. For example, sad and melancholy music has an envelope that has a long, slow, sustained fall. Angry music has sharp rises and falls. Happy music has many sustained rises. A similar mechanism seems to be working with speech. Emotional information is carried by qualities like pitch, timbre, loudness, articulation, pace, stress patterns, pauses, etc.

Here are some specifications for use in artificial robot-produced speech:

- Fearful speech - very fast, wide pitch contour, large pitch variance, high mean pitch, normal intensity, breathy, precise articulation.
- Angry speech - loud, slightly fast, wide pitch range and high variance. Low mean pitch gives a prohibiting quality, staccato contour.
- Sad speech - slower speech rate, longer pauses, low mean pitch, narrow pitch range and low variance, slightly breathy. Slurred articulation. Contour falls at the end.
- Happy speech - relatively fast, high mean pitch, wide pitch range and wide variance, loud with smooth undulating inflections.
- Disgusted speech - slow with long pauses, low mean pitch, wide pitch range, quiet and slightly creaky quality, contour has global downward slope.
- Surprised - fast, high mean pitch, high pitch range, fairly loud, steep rising contour on final stressed syllable in final word.

Some aspects of voice are so important to understanding language that we give clues to them in written language. The only difference between a statement and a question is usually the voice. We need a special mark, '?', to show the way the voice has to rise. We also seem to need '!' to show the emphasis needed for some sentences. As well as the period to show the pause at the end of a sentence, we also need the comma's little pause and the dash's medium pause. We need but do not have a symbol for irony (to show slow speaking with heavy stresses and a nasal tone) and so it takes great skill to be successfully ironic when writing.

The word 'prosody' is used for some aspects of voice. For example, the difference between 'forty-eight, two, ten' and 'forty, eight, two, ten' or between 'the decorated, white house' and 'the decorated Whitehouse' is called clumping and is created by pauses and stress patterns. Another aspect is focus. This is seen in the contrast between 'We went home' and 'We went home'. The emphasis on words has been used by computer programs that vet voice mail to identify what the keywords of the message are. Without these constant clues to meaning, it is very hard to understand speech. In order to speak clearly with useful prosody and voice variation, we must speak near our natural pace and volume, without too much interference from fear.

Janet

Speaking Skills (7) - Facial Expression

Facial expression is one of our most important communication tools. Here are some aspects you may find interesting:

- The face's movements are partly under our conscious control and partly automatic. For example we can smile a polite smile any time we want to, and we also spontaneously smile. The difference is noticeable, especially around the eyes. It is not that a polite smile is false, it can, be but it needed not be. A polite smile is simply not spontaneous. There are also equivalent frowns, looks of pity and the like. These can be identified as not the spontaneous version by subtle differences in the muscles used. Of course, it is not black and white - you can have facial expressions that are part way between polite and spontaneous. When speaking, you can force facial expressions (as opposed to being relaxed and letting them happen), but the more forced the expression, the more false it looks.
- There are 40 odd muscles used in the facial expressions. A few people have learned to control most of them consciously using methods like electronic feedback. These people have then learned to make very good approximations of the spontaneous versions of expressions. Something surprising happened. If you learn to really look happy, you start to feel happy. If you learn to really look angry, you start to feel angry. So it is a good guess that if you allow your face to show emotion, you yourself will feel the emotion more strongly and it will show more clearly in your voice and gestures.
- Your face starts to show the expression appropriate for what you are thinking before you get the words out of your mouth. This means that the listener sees your facial expression before the words arrive. The listener also can understand to facial expression almost immediately whereas the words take time. The words are understood in the context of the facial expression. This is very helpful to the listener - listening is more accurate, faster, easier, less tiring.
- Some speakers say that they get started well with an audience if they smile before they start to speak. It sets a positive tone right from the beginning. They feel better about the audience and the audience feels better about them. They also find that they have less difficulty with using facial expressions during the speech if they have started out with a smile to get things moving.
- People can have facial expressions that they are not aware of. Sometimes they are inappropriate to what they are saying. For example, someone can frown when they are being very serious. They do not know they are frowning unless someone tells them. Someone can smile when they are nervous about what they are saying, even if it is something that is the opposite of pleasant or funny.
- It is practically impossible to have reasonable facial expressions unless you have reasonable eye contact. You have to smile or look sympathetic or be determined at someone (not a wall). Janet

Speaking Skills (8) - Vocabulary

How do we choose the right words? What are the right words?

- First, they are words that the audience can understand. There is no use in using words that will not carry any meaning. We can, of course, introduce a new word and define it. That may even be the point of the speech. But that can only apply to a few words in any one speech. What words will be understood depends on the age, education and ethnicity of the audience. If I really know and understand what I am saying, then I should be able to put it in words for specialists, or for ordinary people, or for young children.
- Second, the words need to be chosen to carry the meaning as accurately as possible. There are often many words that could be used for a particular thought. They will be vaguer or more specific, dull or colourful, high-brow or common, with positive or negative implications. It is worth the effort to find the right words to carry the meaning and have the appropriate emotional feeling. Using just the right meaning in one word or phrase can save a lot of time, effort and confusion.
- Third, use words that you are comfortable with. It sounds terrible if a word is mispronounced or used in a grammatically incorrect way. Use the words you know well. This does not mean that you should not increase your vocabulary - but use a new word for a while before using it in a formal speech.
- Fourth, you do not want to offend with your words so avoid curses, coarse words and 'put downs'. Very occasionally a taboo word can be used for extreme dramatic effect but it takes great skill and a knowledge of your audience's tolerance. Unless you are very sure of your ground avoid offensive words.
- Fifth, be careful about slang. You may want to use it or want to avoid it, depending on the occasion. Learn to be able to speak without slang so you have choices. Poor enunciation, lazy pronoucation, has the same effect as slang, it can sound ignorant, and it also makes the listener work harder to follow the speech.
- Finally, think about how the words sound and sound together. The difference between good speaking and sheer eloquence, can be in sound of the words and in the cadence of the sentences. If when you say something out loud, it just sounds good, use it.

Janet

Speaking Skills (9) - Imagery

People say that a picture is worth a thousand words, and this is very often true. The speaker is trying to get the listener to visualize what he is saying. There are basically four to produce a picture in the listeners head.

- We can actually give the person a picture as an audio-visual aid, as a prop or as a handout. This method has some great advantages and some great disadvantages.
- We can describe the image we want to produce in words. This is quite time-consuming and difficult for both the speaker and the listener.
- We can describe the image with gestures as well as words. This is much easier on everyone but still can take some time.
- We use a word or phrase that will remind the listener of a complex image. The problem here is to find that perfect word or phrase. This is what people mean when they talk about using vivid imagery. Imagery is quick, it is clear, it is interesting, it carries emotion.

Here is an example. Suppose I was speaking and I described the following. 'Something has happened that will result in a north and south line of borders between two groups of states in Europe, separating the one group from the other. Over that line of borders there will be very little communication or movement of people. There will be very little trade and no military cooperation. Each side will have difficulty finding out what is happening on the other side of the line of borders.' That's about 72 words. Now Churchill described this in 18 words. 'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.' That is my 4 words for every 1 of Churchill's. And ever since, people have found it faster to use the term 'iron curtain' rather than take a paragraph to explain the concept. By creating a picture, you do not have to say everything. Much can be implied. The picture is going to carry a lot of information that does not have to be said.

An image is clearer because it is more concrete. With my explanation, the listener has to draw a picture in there head in order to follow what I am saying. But I give the listener no help; they are on their own drafting and re-drafting their picture as I go on talking. In the end they may not have an accurate idea of what I was trying to say. 'From the Baltic to the Adriatic' is pretty easy to picture.

My explanation was, quite simply, boring. I can see people giving up. Churchill's is anything but boring. It has colour and movement and interest. We know that it is the sort of phrase that people not only hear and understand but that they remember and use themselves.

And it carries emotion. Take the word 'iron'. It makes you think of strong, unbreakable, fortified, cruel, heavy etc. Take the word 'curtain'. It makes you think of opaque, secret, an end of something etc. Churchill does not have to say that this 'iron curtain' has an army guarding it. He does not have to say that we do not know what is going on behind it. These sorts of ideas are carried emotionally in the image.

It is worth the effort to find that 'just right' image!

Janet

Speaking Skills (10) - **Big and Loud**

Have you ever listened to a speech and thought they were 'over the top'? They were just too loud and too dramatic and too much all together. On the other hand I am sure you have listened to people who were too soft, too still and just too subdued.

The problem is that many people do not adjust their speaking to the size of the room and the size of the audience. If you are close to a handful of people then you don't shout and jump about. If you are 10 yards from several hundred people you will definitely need to exaggerate.

Here are some hints:

- The size of your gestures should be approximately the same size in someone's eye to be registered easily. So think that in our normal club room, the size of your gestures may be about the same as the width of your hand at arms length. In a theatre, if you sit in one of the audience seats and hold out your arm, your hand may cover a third of the stage. To have the same visual effect you are going to have to move with bigger motions.
- Think of the size of your movement fitting the size of the room. So in a small room make gesture with your fingers, in medium rooms with your whole hand, in large rooms with your whole arms and finally your whole body.
- Draw yourself a box in space (size depending on the room) and make that your space to use fully. Give yourself 'permission' to own that space.
- As you speak louder you speak slower and you need more breathe. Be aware of this in your timing.
- Use the microphone if one is available. Practice with it first.
- Remember that a large room means that you must also exaggerate your vocal variety (unless you are using a microphone).
- Notice the audience's reaction. A slight moving forward is ideal and shows interest. Straining forward means they cannot hear or see you clearly. Recoiling means you have hit them unexpectedly with too much volume.
- Take a clue from other speakers that precede you. How much do they move and how easy is it to see? How much do they increase their voice volume and how easy is it to hear?
- Do not use props and signs that are way too big or small for the size of the event. You may have to abandon a small prop all together for a large audience.

Entering a contest or volunteering for a role or presentation to a large audience can give you some practice with different types, sizes and layouts of audience.

Janet