

# AN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON NON-VERBAL EXPRESSIONS CAPTURING ATTENTION IN DAILY INTERACTIONS IN PUBLIC PLACES

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**Abstract:** This ethnographic study explored the different ways people tended to use to capture attention in their daily interactions and communication in various settings around a university campus in the USA. The study focused on the non-verbal aspect of communication, namely facial expressions, body language and gestures. It adopted non-participant observation for data collection. The findings indicate that there were four non-verbal tendencies in ways of capturing attention. They were standing out, consistency (with variability), creating connections with others/the audience, and being expressive in gestures to others/the audience.

**Key words:** Ethnographic observation, non-verbal interactions, attention

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is natural that when people speak, they frequently move their bodies to supplement what they say. These gestures or non-verbal expressions constitute an integral part of human language. Gestures are used by speakers to illustrate what they want to transfer to the listeners and to catch their attention. Clearly, in social situations, interactions and conversations, communication is more likely to be fruitful when participating individuals pay attention. De Castell and Jensen ([2], p. 385) stated:

*The primary currency of an information society - that is, a society in which information is designated the main commodity produced, marketed, and consumed - is necessarily attention.*

Attention is such a fundamental need that wherever information exchange is involved, people tend to exhibit gestures or other non-verbal and verbal cues that would allow them to grab the attention of the people with whom they are communicating. Hostetter ([6], p. 299) pointed out, "Gestures may have communicative power because they engage the listener's attention and promote a positive rapport between speaker and listener".

Several previous studies have been carried out to investigate whether and how gestures are used in daily interactions to capture attention of the addressees. For example, the study by Gullberg and Sotaro [4] on speakers' gaze to their own gestures and addressees' overt visual attention to gestures found that for face-to-face communication, addressees' gaze is multifunctional and not necessarily a reliable index of attention locus, information uptake or comprehension. Addressees clearly look at different things for different reasons and one cannot assume that overt visual attention to something.

However, in another study by Gullberg and Holmqvist [5], the researchers used eye-tracking techniques to examine whether addressees visually attend to speakers' gestures in interaction and whether attention is modulated by changes in social setting and display size. The finding shows that the attraction force of holds is unaffected by changes in social and size parameter and that speaker-fixated gestures draw significantly less attention. Valenzeno, Alibali, and Klatzky [11] studied the relations between gestures and children's attention. The authors found that gestures are particularly good at getting children's attention, thereby encouraging them to attend more closely to the spoken message. Sugiyama, Kanda, Imai, Ishiguro, Hagita, and Anzai [10] found that people used gestures (along with possible verbal cues) such as pointing to bring the audience's attention to the object of discussion. In their research, Sugiyama et al. [10] used the effective "three-layer attention-drawing model has been developed based on observations of human conversations that refer to objects in the environment" to develop robots that succeeded in capturing attention using this method of attention-drawing. The previous studies focused deeply on certain aspects of gestures and attention. However, they did not use different settings of daily interactions for a general understanding of what people usually do to capture attention of the addressees. Thus, the current study was set out to fill this gap.

### **Research Objective**

The objective of this research is to explore the different ways people tend to use in order to capture attention in their daily interactions and communication in various settings around a university campus in the US. The study specifically focuses on the non-verbal aspect of communication, such as facial expressions, body language and gestures.

### **Research Question**

This research paper aims to answer the following research question: What are the non-verbal expressions that capture attention in daily communication/interactions in public places?

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Non-verbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication includes eye contact, glances, gestures, facial expressions, postures, etc. and can be made not only through smiles, frowns, eye-contact and body movement but also through the clothes worn and the accent cultivated. Non-verbal communication issues have been studied. One study by Ekman [3], for example, focused on bodily movement, gesture, vocalisation, and particularly facial movement as expressive of affect. In this study, non-verbal expressions include facial expressions, gestures, hand movement, tone of voice, and smiles.

### **What is Attention?**

According to Ratey [9], attention is more than just noticing incoming stimuli. It involves a number of processes including filtering out perceptions, balancing multiple perceptions and attaching emotional significance to these perceptions. Similarly,

Hostetter [6] stated that gestures may contribute to comprehension by capturing and maintaining listeners' attention. Listeners who can see a speaker's gestures may be more engaged and thus pay more attention to the speaker's message than listeners who cannot see a speaker's gestures. Levine [8] has provided a conceptual framework of components of attention which include: Alertness and arousal, selectivity and saliency determination, distractibility, duration of attention, previewing and planning, self-monitoring and self-regulation, and need for stimulation and body movement. Alertness and arousal, is the first step in the attention process. When we are going to do something, we need is to feel alert and aroused. The next step is selectivity, as we cannot attend to stimuli, we must decide which ones are the most important to pay attention to. Distractibility is to filter out or ignore other things around us that might distract us. Duration and attention means the time amount we spend to pay attention to something. In the step of previewing and planning, we consider all of the possible actions we could perform and decide from among them which one is the best given the specific set of circumstances. Self-monitoring and self-regulation involves checking over a task that is in progress, assessing the progress, and making adjustments when necessary. Lastly, need for stimulation and body movement refers to the level of stimulation at which we are most comfortable.

Levine [8] provided a comprehensive description of what attention involves and the processes to get attention. Attention in the current study is, however, restricted to the level of stimulation and arousal due to the scope of the paper. The study generally explored what factors of non-verbal expressions stimulated people to pay attention to the speakers. It did not go into depth to explore other aspects of attention. Besides, it requires a longitudinal study to dwell into the processes of paying attention patterns.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Method, Participants and Settings**

This is an ethnographic observational study. The researcher gathered data through non-participant and naturalistic observation, which is appropriate to observe human behaviors in group settings (Cooper, Lewis & Urquhart [1]). The subjects being observed are people including students, staff, other people, etc. who were on a campus at an American university (see Appendices A, B, C, and D for more details of the sites of observation). The researcher did not tell the subjects that they were being observed. Observation was carried out in four different locations: a library, a plaza, the Krishna lunch area, and a ballroom. These sites were chosen because there were many people and interactions being carried out at these places. The two locations, the plaza and the ballroom were especially unique because there were events taking place. In the first site, people were doing group work, and in the second site, an event on public speaking on the topic of abortion took place. The third site was holding an undergraduate research symposium. The last site served lunch by people following the Hare Krishna movement, a branch of Hinduism.

In these four sites, the researcher chose the position of a non-participant and took field notes using a laptop, a smartphone or a notebook, depending on the setting. She tried to blend in with other people in the environment but did not personally take part in the activities. This was to make sure that people did not notice that they were being observed and to ensure the most natural behaviours.

### **Data Analysis**

The field notes, after being gathered, were read and re-read multiple times to examine the themes that emerged. Afterwards, inductive content analysis was used to develop main themes indicating attention capturing non-verbal behaviours arising from the field notes.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **Non-verbal expressions to capture attention in group work**

The first floor of the library is the venue where a lot of group work occurs. Students did not study individually and quietly like higher floors (Appendix A). Most students sat in groups, around round tables to discuss their group projects. Here, when students discussed and talked about their opinions or ideas to their groups, they often used a lot of hand gestures, pointing and body language to illustrate what they are trying to communicate. People who spoke tended to maintain a lot of eye contact with those to whom they were talking. Not only were their gestures expressive, but also their facial expression (smile, laughing, cringing, etc.) and their tones of voice (varying, showing emotion). Those who were standing up while they presented or talked tended to attract more attention from their fellow group members (see Object 1 below for a sketch of a group discussion in the library). Making eye contact was widely used, as well as facing towards the person to whom they were talking and maintaining a closer proximity.



Object 1. *Sketch of a group discussion in the library*

### **Non-verbal expressions to capture attention in public speaking**

In the second venue, the plaza (Appendix B), there was an event happening at the time of observation, where a middle-aged male speaker was giving (persuasive) speech on the topic of abortion. The speaker attracted a lot of people, mostly students who came to listen. Some voiced their opinions or debated. As for the speaker, he was very expressive, sometimes seemingly aggressive and assertive about his points and opinions. He used a lot of hand and arm gestures, expressing resentment. His tone of voice suggested a lot of questions, most of which were rhetorical. He made eye contact with his audience, one person at a time, not with everybody at once, and he walked around slightly within the circle that was formed by the standing audience. The students who were participating, especially the ones who voiced their opinions, had non-verbal body language such as yelling to get others' attention, hand gestures, stepping forward when they spoke, pointing and nodding. Around the plaza, there were also other students representing different organizations or handing out flyers. These students attracted attention by maintaining eye contact, slightly following to hand out flyers, questioning those who spoke to them, pointing and maintaining a close proximity during interaction.

### **Non-verbal expressions to capture attention in academic presentations**



Object 2. *A sketch of a presentation at the undergraduate research symposium*

The third place of observation was a ballroom (Appendix C). There, an undergraduate research symposium was taking place. Students in professional attire stood by their posters to present their research. There were interested people who came by to ask questions about the students' projects and the students would present and answer questions. The students presenting their research had similar ways of capturing information as aforementioned situations. They used a lot of hand gestures while

presenting their works, especially pointing at different parts on their posters as they discussed, explained or presented (see Object 2 for a sketch of a presentation at an undergraduate research symposium). When presenting, they made a lot of eye contact with each and every individual who was listening to them present and asking questions. They continuously looked back and forth between their poster and their audience, made direct eye contact and showed attentiveness when they were being asked questions. They also smiled and made eye contact with those who passed and looked at their posters.

### **Non-verbal expressions to capture attention in gathering for religion practice**

At Krishna lunch area (Appendix D), there were people who were part of the Hare Krishna organization and the people who ate Krishna lunch. While the people who ate had similar ways of capturing attention as other situations mentioned above (e.g. eye contact, hand gestures, facial expressions, etc.), the difference in this context lies in the Hare Krishna practitioners who danced, chanted and played traditional musical instruments. They do this every day as a practice; they vary their different ways of chanting or dancing each day, or even within a day. They did not usually interact with people who were passing by, for they were focusing on their chanting. However, they did capture the attention of many passersby and those who ate Krishna lunch (these people sat nearby to watch or listen). Within the group of chanters, they made eye contact and smiled at each other while chanting, playing or dancing.

### **Interpretation of Data and Discussion**

Overall, the four main patterns of capturing attention that arose from the observation include standing out with raising voice, standing up, consistency with variability by doing something everyday or for a prolonged period of time with variations, varying tone of voice/speed of speech, etc. and being expressive with arm gestures or body movement and facial expressions. These patterns vary remarkably in the four different research locations.

Firstly, in the setting for group work, the findings indicate that to get others' attention, speakers often used a lot of hand gestures, pointing and body language to illustrate what they are trying to communicate as shown in the observation of the first research setting in which group work took place. The speakers in this setting tended to maintain a lot of eye contact and used facial expressions with those to whom they were talking. This finding goes in line with what Sugiyama et al. [10] have pointed out that for communication, to create connections with others/audience, people used eye contact, pointing, looking at the person/people to whom they are talking, questioning, etc.

Secondly, "standing out" pattern was more dominant in the setting of debating on a controversial topic. According to Keller [7], perceptual arousal, or a sudden or unexpected change in the environment will activate a person's attention. One of the examples given for this strategy was a change of voice. This could be linked to the "standing out" theme of getting attention; for instance, the speaker who spoke about abortion would once in a while raise his voice or spoke more strongly, grabbing the

attention of his audience. The speaker asked questions, creating connections with their audience through the act of inquiring.

Thirdly, due to the nature of doing presentation on research and academic topics, speakers in the third setting used more hand gestures than other non-verbal expressions. The speakers used hand gestures to point at different parts on their posters and explained. They were also attentive to the audience who asked them questions. This is one way to create connections with the audience as suggested by Sugiyama et al. [10]. Pointing, according to Sugiyama et al. [10] is to bring the audience's attention to the object of discussion.

Fourthly, as the purpose is to capture attention of others, the Hare Krishna practitioners in the last setting, danced, chanted, smiled and played traditional musical instruments. These non-verbal expressions and actions served the purpose of sending a peaceful and cheerful message to the audience. To some extent, the expressions of the Hare Krishna practitioners indicate consistency with variability by doing something similar or for a prolonged period of time with variations. They used non-verbal expressions to promote positive rapport with listeners (Hostetter, [6]).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, this ethnographic observational study focused on the daily non-verbal expressions that capture attention in daily communication/ interactions in public places on the campus of a university in the US. The findings indicate the four tendencies in ways of capturing attention. They are standing out, consistency (with variability), creating connections with others/the audience, and being expressive in gestures to others/the audience. As the purpose of each setting in this study was different, the participants used different dominant patterns of gestures and non-verbal expressions. More use of tone of voice and questioning in debating a controversial topic in public speaking but smiles and gestures accompanying chanting for the religious lunch. Academic presenters relied more on with hand gestures for pointing and explaining and expressive use of gestures and facial expression in group work to catch attention of listeners. These findings suggest that non-verbal communication is multifunctional and not necessarily a fixed index of attention locus, information uptake or comprehension as pointed out by Gullberg and Sotaro [4].

Although there are findings from past research that coincide with this study's findings, there are also certain aspects that would benefit from additional research methods, such as the use of quantitative research and/or experiments to triangulate the results. Ethnography was used in the current study and data collection method was restricted to natural observation only. The results of this study are thus exploratory and are not suggested to be generalized. Further research related to the topic of non-verbal communication to capture attention would help us to obtain more specific and reliable findings. The reliability of this study could also be improved by collecting data on a larger scale, among a more varied population or by using cross-checking of coding of

the observed behaviours by different observers. Besides, observations for a longer period of non-verbal expressions in capturing attention would reveal more consistent patterns of this channel of communication.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### FIELD NOTES

##### **Marston library** (a lot of group work going on)

- Preliminary observation:
  - Hand gestures, being expressive, using body language to “illustrate” what they are talking about
  - Standing up while others in the group are sitting down
  - Maintaining eye contact with other group members, especially with the one they are communicating with
  - Projecting voice more in group work, making themselves sound louder, better heard and listened to amongst the many people talking in the group
  - The person who tends to be more prominent in the group tends to capture the most attention
  - Pointing
    - At what they are discussing, talking about
  - Hand, arm gestures while maintaining eye contact and talking, face more expressive —> tends to be an expectation that the other person would respond to the expectation of needing attention
  - A lot of hand gestures
  - Facing the person the speech is directed towards
  - Tone of voice:
    - Also more expressive
    - Questioning
    - Tapping/shoulder to get attention
    - Varied pace/speed of speech, putting emphasis on things in the conversation that they think are important and would like the attention/opinion of the other person
  - Smiling/laughing
  - Leaning closer to the other person

### Appendix B

#### FIELD NOTES

##### **Turlington Plaza** (Abortion debate event going on)

- Speaker
  - Speaking very loudly, mildly shouting angrily at times, raising voice with question
  - A lot of hand gestures, showing resentment, very expressive
  - Making eye contact with the audience
  - Walking around slightly
  - Questions
  - Assertiveness
  - “Duh” “right?” gestures

- Students/audience
  - Yelling to get attention
  - Hand gestures
  - Stepping forward
  - Pointing
  - Nodding

Students representing organizations in Turlington, handing out flyers

- Maintaining eye contact
- Following
- Questioning
- Close proximity
- Pointing

### Appendix C

#### FIELD NOTES

**Reitz Ballroom** (Undergraduate Research Symposium) - March 22

Students presenting their research

- A lot of hand gestures while they are presenting their work or answering questions posed by people who attend
- Point at the corresponding things on their posters as they discuss/explain/present
- When presenting, make eye contact with each and every individual who is listening to their presentation
- They continuously look back and forth between their poster and their audience
- Make direct eye contact and show attentiveness when they are being asked questions
- Smile and making eye contact with those who pass and look at their poster

### Appendix D

#### FIELD NOTES

**Krishna Lunch**

Hare Krishna practitioners

- Dance
- Sing
- Chant
- Play their musical instruments
- They do it everyday as a practice, does not ask anyone to join, but usually captures the attention of people who pass by
- They do not make eye contact, interact with people, they focus on their chanting
- They make interactions and eye contact within the group, smile at each other while they are chanting

➔ Maybe consistency captures attention? (They do it everyday)