

Nonverbal communication : fascinating

What are the many forms and functions of laughter? What does it mean when someone picks imaginary lint off his suit? How does greeting behaviour vary among cultures and subcultures?

Students at UNB are finding out the answers to these and other questions in the first courses to be given in these multi-disciplinary field of nonverbal communication. The courses are offered by the departments of sociology, anthropology and psychology and are taught by Prof. Fernando Poyatos.

Nonverbal communication is the study of how we communicate beyond language. According to Prof. Poyatos, it is a very complex field, based on serious, scientific investigation. It has acquired a status of its own within the social and behavioral sciences as well as in several areas of the humanities he says. NATO has sponsored two international study institutes in the field.

Nonverbal communication should not be confused with what is popularly known as "body language," Prof. Poyatos warns. These how-to-read-your-man-or-woman paperbacks with their misleading covers offer pseudo-scientific, oversimplified explanations of what various nonverbal behaviors mean. Their interpretations often ignore cultural and subcultural differences, socio-economic and environmental factors and individual peculiarities. All in all, he concludes, they give "a very superficial view of the field as something based on impressionistic judgement and lucky intuition."

There are, Prof. Poyatos says, many forms of nonverbal communication. These range from the strictly bodily ones to those involving the objects we handle and the environment we build or modify. At very basic levels we convey messages through chemical reactions such as tears and perspiration and through the use of chemical substances such as lotions and perfumes. How these messages are perceived and valued varies in different situations and cultures.

One area of the field - called paralanguage - is concerned with how something is said, rather than with what is said. Paralinguistic studies focus on physiologically, psychologically and socially conditioned tones of voice, on qualities of speech - whether husky, high-pitched, whispered or drawled - and on a great variety of independent sounds. These include breath intakes, sniffs, tongue clicks, moans, throat clearings, coughing, laughing, crying, hissing, whistling and meaningful glances. These forms of nonverbal communication can express such things as social class, emotional state or mental attitude, Prof. Poyatos says, and their meaning can vary from culture to culture.

The study of postures, gestures and manners is another area of the field of nonverbal communication. This area, known as kinesics, is concerned with the significance of these kinds of body movements and positions from cultural, histor-

ical, social, psychological and clinical perspectives. Kinesics develops from childhood to maturity along with language and paralanguage. It varies according to sex, culture, and personality. Kinesic studies constitute the bulk of nonverbal communication research today in many disciplines and has the greatest impact on our daily relationships with others, Prof. Poyatos says.

Another area of the field is known as proxemics. It focuses on the conceptualization and treatment of space and interpersonal distance, whether public, social, personal or intimate. Perceptions of space have very important implications across different cultures. Different ideas about touching (or not touching) members of the same or opposite sex in specific situations and about one's own territory and privacy often cause misunderstandings. The businessman who keeps his desk between himself and a visitor to his office is communicating the message, "Know and and keep your place." The businessman who consciously joins his visitor on common ground inspires very different feelings.

Prof. Poyatos has developed the concepts of cultural fluency and fluency quotient. To function in a foreign culture one needs to acquire a certain level of fluency not only in the spoken language but also in the nonverbal systems of the culture. Fluency quotient is a measure of the level of cultural fluency required for successful interaction, whether in another culture or in different social environments of one's own country. One's F.Q. is determined not only by how one acts but also by how one perceives and reacts to the behaviors of others.

He tells the story of an old friend at the University of Madrid. This friend, a native of Ohio, intended to behave just like a Spaniard and made a point of speaking Spanish. However, he failed to shake hands with women, talked with his hands crossed over his head and stretched his arms. He would not leave a tip at a bar. At the table he kept changing his fork from one hand to the other, pushed his cake with his thumb, and bit from a slice of bread. In short, though he could communicate verbally in Spanish, he was still in desperate need of a little cultural fluency.

Nonverbal behavior repeats, supports, contradicts or emphasizes whatever one says, Prof. Poyatos maintains. It is therefore a vitally important subject to psychologists and psychiatrists to nurses, doctors, and other in medical fields and to persons in the helping professions such as social workers, sociologists and counsellors.

When and how a nurse touches a patient, holds his hand, looks into his eyes, smiles, laughs, walks into the room and so on all communicate attitudes toward him and his illness that are perceived, whether consciously or unconsciously. These perceptions can have therapeutic value, Prof. Poyatos says.

Training in nonverbal communication, sociologists and social workers acquire a better understanding of the behavior of such social groups as ethnic minorities,

subcultures and institutionalized persons. They become more sensitive towards society in general as they learn how nonverbal communication functions in such social phenomena as territoriality, the sociology of small groups, crowding and behaviors in public places.

Nonverbal communication is also important in the fields of business, economics and diplomacy. International business requires some understanding of cultural differences. Prof. Poyatos gives attitudes toward time as an example. Some cultures insist on promptness while others tolerate a much more relaxed attitude toward meeting an appointment. Gestures carry different meanings in various cultures. In Japan, the o.k. sign used by North Americans has traditionally meant money. A North American businessman unaware of this fact could communicate something he didn't intend at all.

Nonverbal communication plays an important role in effective personnel management. A manager trained in nonverbal commun-

ication can tell a great deal about a prospective employee in the job interview. Relevant research is being done in this area, Prof. Poyatos reports. Clothes, jewelry, cosmetics, pipe and cigarette handling, and eyeglasses style can all be indicators of personality, socio-economic status and culture to the trained observer.

Nonverbal systems are also essential in the representational and performing arts, Prof. Poyatos says. Narrative literature is dependent on descriptions of the gestures, manners, postures and voice characteristics of the characters for their differentiation as individuals and the portrayal of their emotions, culture and specific situations. Such descriptions in literature may also provide information about manners and postures which have disappeared over time as styles in clothing and furniture have changed and evolved.

The painter, working in a completely nonverbal medium, uses facial expressions, the space between figures, their sitting,

standing or lying postures and their objectional environment to communicate attitudes, emotions, and culture.

The functions of paralanguage and kinesics in the theatre is a topic of particular interest to Prof. Poyatos, who recently completed a book chapter on the subject. How the characters speak, the various sounds and gestures they make, the postures they assume and so on are all carefully specified by the playwright and later by the director, he points out. The cinema, he adds, "attains the subtlest representation of nonverbal behaviors." One student in his first term class thinks what she has learned about nonverbal communication will help her in the costume studies program she plans to enter after graduation.

Nonverbal systems function in architecture and landscaping. Research has shown that architects condition the behavior of people by creating the type of spaces they live in, Prof. Poyatos

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Crack a pack of Colts along with the cards.