

## Facial expression as an attribute in communication

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" Often a silent face has voice and words"

### Introduction

Our everyday communication takes place in two forms namely the verbal and non-verbal . In order to fully comprehend the message of a dialogue, one has to go beyond the linguistic connotation of the message since verbal messages very often contain only a small proportion of the information conveyed in an average exchange. According to Birdwhistell (1970) in each interaction over 65% of the social meaning is transmitted through non-verbal cues while only 35% of the message is conveyed in the verbal form. Thus one cannot overlook non-verbal cues in any interaction since such cues form an essential ingredient to the understanding of messages. These cues can be drawn from a host of signal systems and which include paralanguages, kinesics, proxemics, chronemics, physical characteristics, facial expressions and gestures, touching behaviour , artifacts and other environmental emitters (1956; Hall,1959;Harrison,1972 ;Druckman, 1982).

By understanding the non-verbal cues an individual can relate or predict the meaning and outcome of a dialogue more effectively. This paper examines facial expression as an attribute in a communication system. It begins by indicating the relevance of facial expression in communication studies. A set of graphic caricatures are then presented to demonstrate the important role of the face in non-verbal communication. Despite its unquestionable contribution, facial

expression is needless to say, culture-bound. It certainly can be misleading to examine facial expression in isolation for in the final analysis, it is only one complementary aspect of the multifarious dimension in interpersonal and/or intercultural communication.

#### The subject of facial expression

The human face has always received the attention of many for various reasons. The beauty of Helen of Troy, the smile of Mona Lisa and the pain in Van Gogh's eyes have captivated the interest of many who come from far and near to conduct research with the hope of understanding the lifestyles of the past. Fortunes have been made out of reading other people's faces in the desire to delve in the realm of the unknown future. Proverb such as the face is the index of the heart(mind) illuminates the potential of the face as a source of information. Admittedly, the face does hold a thousand secrets and has had the longest history of empirical research compared to any other parts of the body (Darwin, 1872; Ekman, Friesen and Tomkins, 1956; Ekman, Friesen and Ellsworth, 1971). Besides being a popular subject for research the face is also the focus of the non-verbal system. It emits cues which reflect problems and situations in other parts of the body including the mind.

Facial expressions are however only part of non-verbal communication system which provide a unique mode of message transmission. A speaker who knows the general rule of facial displays can manipulate and command the flow of information in a dialogue. He can modulate his speech, for example with either a smile or a frown, and his respondents can react simultaneously either by projecting a look of spirited appreciation or overt disapproval. Thus, in a dialogue the non-verbal form is just as important, if not more, than the verbal form since a major proportion of interpersonal communication are expressed in the form of "silent messages".

Today, there exist a number of techniques for analysing facial expressions. Among them is the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) (Ekman, 1971). FACS is a system which codes movements of facial muscles that alters the shape or appearance of facial features (Ekman and Friesen, 1971). There is also the Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity Test (PONS) which is a standard test of sensitivity to nonverbal cues. Added to these is the Test of Micromomentary Movements Effects (TOMME) which is most helpful in decoding facial cues (McLeod, 1983). Past studies have also used still photographs of a single person but this procedure has come under some methodological criticism. A simple but rather fascinating technique which can be easily applied across cultures is the use of pictomorphs or schematic faces, referred to as the pictic analysis (Harrison, 1965).

There are specific procedures which can be followed to test the accuracy of facial expressions as an indicator of the state of emotion of a subject. By using verbal stimulants it is possible to coax and record expressions in photographs and motion pictures. Hence, the scientific methods of analysing facial expressions makes it possible for the existing display patterns to be predicted and manipulated by an individual. There is also some common understanding and recognition of the display rules which include:

(1) expressions of the felt emotions through the act of intensification. For example, a look of intense happiness at meeting an old friend who is also extremely overjoyed with the reunion.

(2) slighting the felt emotion through the act of deintensification. For example, a person can be unhappy at receiving a grade C for the exam but still put on a happy smile because everyone else has got an A and is gleeful about it.

(3) hiding felt emotion through neutral expression. For example, there is no change in expression by a person who is somewhat stunned on receiving a gift in a raffle - as if it did not matter.

(4) camouflaging the felt emotion through masked expressions. For example, one can be angry at being kept waiting by a friend, but once the friend shows up, the person puts on a smiling face as if he or she did not mind being kept waiting after all.

Generally, people will display an affective expression when experiencing an emotion unless desired otherwise. Since facial display rules can be acquired and mastered, well socialised individuals in any culture are likely to project the expected 'face' according to the social situation.

#### Face as Communicator

How then can one say that the face is the most powerful emitter of messages as compared to other parts of the body? To begin with, the three most adjustable features which generate decipherable information from the face are the eyes, eyebrows and the mouth. Indeed a single variation of each of these features can always elicit predictable interpretation and reaction (Harrison, 1976). In the display of emotions there appears to be a universally acceptable vocabulary of facial expressions which are reliably linked to the affective state of the individual. There is sufficient regularity in the patterns of emotional displays on the face which makes comparison possible between the level of specific identity traits to the universal.

Using schematic faces it is possible to caricaturise facial expressions by highlighting the three most mobile features namely the eyes, eyebrows and the mouth in a number of combinations.

Below for example are 4 pictomorphs which universally depict 4 different emotions.



Figure a depicts a state of happiness, agreement and warmth.



Figure b depicts a state of dissatisfaction, grouchiness, unhappiness,



Figure c depicts a state of perplexness or even fearfulness

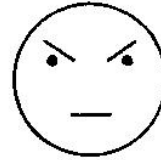
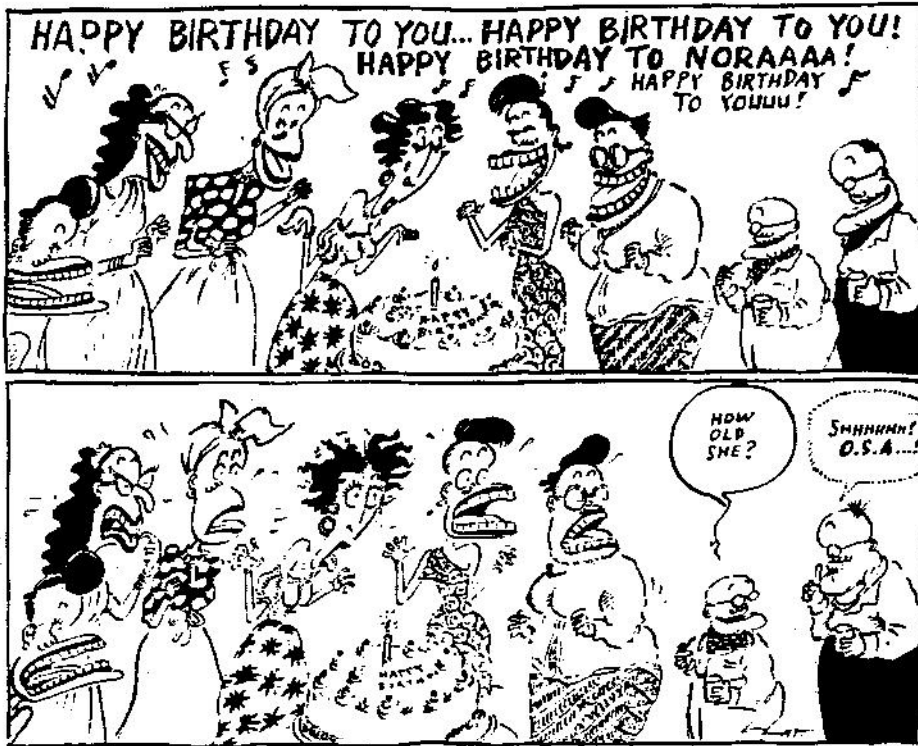


Figure d depicts a state of anger, menace, disagreement

The 4 expressions generated by the above pictics are the more easily recognizable ones. Clearly one can identify the particular facial expression which denotes the corresponding state of emotion. Cartoonic caricatures are classic examples which highlight the use of facial features to depict messages. The following sketches from both a local and a foreign cartoonist suggests that facial expressions can be readily interpreted by the reader.





From: Lat and Gang by Lat. Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn. Bhd. 1987.

It is possible to make an initial assessment of a person's personality simply by observing his or her facial expressions in a social interaction. It is also possible to predict the nature of the conversation that is, whether it is one that is related to happiness, sadness, grief, disappointment or confusion. The face can signal many tell-tale signs such as the repeated smiles which indicate a pleasant and happy encounter; or raised eyebrows but with a smiling mouth, indicating a pleasant surprise; raised eyebrows but with a firm mouth, indicating a rather stern and serious interlude; open eyes, raised eyebrows and an open mouth, possibly an expression of a complete surprise.

Hence, it is possible to use the face as a medium in disseminating or reacting to information which can indicate the nature of an interpersonal interaction. However, the face as a source of information does not stop at the interpersonal level. Even the mass media plays up the significance of the face in highlighting certain traits or characteristics of a person. Politicians are very particular about the right photograph which is to be taken from the right angle, delivering the right expression in media appearance. Badly taken photographs of Nixon had been effectively used against him by the mass media during his presidential attempt against Kennedy in 1962. In this instance the pictures gave an impression of a rather shrewd, calculating, cold and cunning man which is more like the image of a Mafia boss; compared to those of Kennedy's which were forever smiling broadly, and with gentleness in his eyes.

Similarly, advertising inserts also focus on the face especially when promoting a product. The common notion that a person smiles when he or she feels good about something is well exploited. Thus a smiling model promoting a product indicates satisfaction and happiness with the product. It is also associated with parity with the audience, a feeling of welcome and a sense of warmth between model, product and potential consumer (Margue, 1975). However, due to the differing taste in each culture the expression on the face, including the smiles, have to be tailored to meet the

approval of the culture-bound audience. In some cultures, for example the Americans, the full mouth smile is preferred to the close mouth smile whereas the Koreans prefer the latter. More so, the British prefer to leave the audience in a state of guessing about the satisfaction level of a product rather than trying to persuade the audience that it is 100% good. Hence, models tend to portray a seemingly deep thinking and alluring facial expression (Unwin, 1974; Choe, 1986)

#### Communicating across cultures through the face

To a degree cultural values are unique to each ethnic group. For this reason cultural factors do play a significant role in modifying facial expressions in a given situation. Despite variations in cultural values, it is generally recognised that there are recurring facial expressions which apply across cultures. Nonetheless, facial expressions are usually adopted as a reliable source for the initial evaluation of a person's state of emotion within one's own ethnic group, rather than across cultures. In a cross-cultural situation it is always possible to misinterpret an expressed emotion, due to a lack of understanding of the characteristics of a particular culture. Also, the tendency is to interpret the facial expression from one's own cultural understanding. Nevertheless, when a foreigner is among strangers for the first time, any measure of insight which helps the person to recognise the emotion portrayed by the facial expression of the stranger will be a definite advantage in planning a communication strategy.

Another determining variable in the universality of facial expressions is the gender. It has been found that females smile more than males (Mackey, 1971) and that females also demonstrate a wider range of facial expressions than males. Only where anger is concerned, the female has a greater tendency to mask or neutralise it (Ekman, 1976). Here again the accuracy of facial expressions, as an indicator of the internal affective state, is questionable. For not only is it subject to culture and gender variations, it is also subject further to gender across cultures.



## Conclusion

The understanding of facial expression as one of the major cues in non-verbal communication, is undoubtedly helpful in the initial 'breaking of the ice' stage in any social encounter. By being able to predict or gauge the meaning of a particular expression, one can eliminate unnecessarily embarrassing situations. Such ability can further enhance the interactive capability of the individual. However, one cannot rely 100% on facial expressions as a means to unraveling the internal affective state of the individual. Facial expressions as an indicator of the emotional state should not be observed in isolation but in coherence with other bodily cues. It should only be used as a primary source of information during the process of gathering more information in an interpersonal situation. Significant as it may be, it is after all, only one category of the non-verbal communication cues.

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