

Expressions and Gestures Can Be ‘Worth a Thousand Words’

What you communicate nonverbally is just as important as what you say out loud.

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KEY POINTS

- Nonverbal cues, including gesture, body language, and gaze, can increase the effectiveness of communication.
- Bilinguals and multilinguals use gestures differently in each of their languages.
- Experience learning and speaking multiple languages heightens sensitivity to subtle nonverbal social cues.

This week, media is once again abuzz with speculations about Meghan Markle’s body language. Following the release of the Netflix documentary *Harry & Meghan*, there has been an uptick in the number of articles analyzing Prince Harry and Meghan’s [gestures](#), [facial expressions](#) and [body language](#), all of them attempting to decode the "hidden messages" that the royal couple is communicating nonverbally.

Although the rest of us are unlikely to face the same level of scrutiny, the couple’s experience can serve as a cautionary tale, reminding us that what we communicate nonverbally is just as important as what we say out loud.

Research underscores the importance of nonverbal cues, especially when other barriers to communication are present. But in recent years, mask wearing has muddied our communication with one another. Your voice gets muffled, other people can’t read your lips, and you end up having to repeat yourself.

How do we avoid instances of communication breakdown — or repair them when they occur — when communication is impacted by masks, or differences in the languages and dialects we speak?

Compensating with gestures and other nonverbal input can help. To become a successful communicator, one needs to master *both* the skills of sending and receiving information. Effectively using body language as the speaker is one part of the equation, picking up on the subtle cues that someone else is using is the other.



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Imagine you are trying to give a set of complicated directions to a lost tourist. What do you do to ensure that they make it to their destination? In addition to providing verbal instructions, you might find yourself using your index finger to point to that one helpful landmark, using your hands to show the left and right turns, and reorienting your body to face the direction in which they need to start walking.

These actions may seem trivial but in fact, information that you convey via gestures, gaze, body language, and tone of voice can help maximize the chance that you get your message across. Speech accompanied by hand gestures [enhances learning](#) and is rated as more [persuasive](#) than speech with no gestures.

Keep in mind that if you or your conversation partners are bilingual or multilingual, the nonverbal communication cues may very well differ across languages. If you speak [more than one language](#) (like [Meghan does](#)) or the person you are interacting with speaks more than one dialect (like [Harry does](#)), then you may need to pay even closer attention to the nonverbal cues you are giving and receiving.

Interestingly, bilingual speakers [use gestures differently](#) in their two languages. In a study we conducted at Northwestern University, [Thai-English bilingual mothers and preschoolers](#) used [different kinds of gestures](#) across their two languages during daily activities, including when reading a book and playing with toys.

When speaking their stronger language, bilinguals use more visually representative gestures (for example hands rising upward for “up”) to [supplement their speech](#). When speaking their weaker language, bilinguals use more pointing gestures to [compensate for difficulties in expressing their ideas](#).

Knowing multiple languages affects perception of nonverbal cues as early as preschool. Compared to children who speak one language, bilinguals are more successful at [judging their conversation partners' emotions](#) based on tone of voice and using [pointing and eye gaze to find hidden objects](#).

Immersion in linguistically rich environments leads bilinguals to adapt, by paying attention to details that help them make sense of the world. Such sensitivity to subtle, nonlinguistic information is particularly beneficial in social settings, including the workplace. One's ability to "read the room" can result in increased collaboration, productivity, and sense of camaraderie.



Source: Photo by Antenna on Unsplash

If your goal is to be better at public speaking or improve your communication skills at work, school, or in your personal relationships, don't forget to pay attention to your gestures and body language, especially if more than one language is involved. The next time you are in a work meeting, catching up with a friend in a loud restaurant, or being interviewed for a Netflix documentary, remember that nonverbal cues can be worth a thousand words. And if you speak two languages, nonverbal cues may be worth even more.

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