Non-Verbal Communication in Theatre and Film

Arum, Jonathan C., PhD
&
Cornelius Eze Onyekaba, PhD
Department of Creative Arts, Dennis Osadebay University, Anwai-Asaba
Delta State.

INTRODUCTION

Non-verbal communication is a foundational aspect of human interaction, often conveying more meaning than verbal language. In the expressive worlds of theatre and film, where visual storytelling dominates, non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, gestures, posture, spatial relationships, costumes, and even silence become powerful tools for communication. These elements allow actors and filmmakers to transcend linguistic barriers, conveying complex emotions and intentions without spoken dialogue. Historically, non-verbal expression has been central to performance, from the exaggerated masks of ancient Greek theatre, which communicated character archetypes and emotional states, to the nuanced facial expressions captured in modern cinematic close-ups.

As the anthropologist Ray L. Birdwhistell observed, "no more than 30 to 35 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or interaction is carried by words" (45). This suggests that a significant portion of human communication relies on non-verbal signals, a reality that is deeply integrated into both theatrical and cinematic traditions. In theatre, where performers must reach audiences without the benefit of editing or camera focus, actors exaggerate physical and facial expressions to ensure clarity and impact. Conversely, in film, directors use close-ups, camera angles, lighting, and editing to highlight subtle non-verbal cues, allowing for more intimate and restrained performances.

This study explores the multifaceted role of non-verbal communication in theatre and film, focusing on how it enhances narrative structure, deepens character portrayal, and strengthens emotional engagement. By comparing the use of non-verbal strategies across these two art forms, this study highlights their respective roles in communication and the ways in which non verbalised gestures, visual symbols, and embodied actions shape audience understanding and experience.

Theatre and film are artistic forms that rely heavily on communication beyond spoken language, making non-verbal elements indispensable to meaning-making. Non-verbal communication in these mediums encompasses facial expressions, gestures, body movement, posture, proxemics, and visual symbolism as tools for narrative expression. These non-verbal cues not only support dialogue but often transcend it, creating layers of meaning that words alone cannot convey. Birdwhistell asserts that “no human interaction is completely devoid of body motion communication,” emphasizing that physical signals are integral to the semiotic system of

performance (45). Thus, non-verbal communication operates as a powerful narrative device that defines character, expresses emotion, and guides audience interpretation in both theatre and film.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of non-verbal communication lies in its dynamic interaction with other aesthetic elements such as lighting, costume, sound design, and miseenscene. In silent films, for instance, actors employed exaggerated gestures and facial expressions to compensate for the absence of spoken dialogue, establishing a visual language that shaped cinematic storytelling conventions (Knapp 102). Similarly, stage actors utilize kinesic patterns, proxemic arrangements, and symbolic actions to embody character psychology and relationships, often reinforcing or subverting verbal texts. Schechner highlights that performance is "restored behavior," where meaning is generated through both verbal and non-verbal signs embedded in culturally constructed codes (77). This interplay underscores the interdependence of verbal and non-verbal elements in constructing dramatic and cinematic narratives.

However, non-verbal communication in theatre and film is neither universal nor fixed; its interpretation is mediated by cultural and contextual frameworks. Gestures, eye contact, and bodily postures that signify intimacy or respect in one culture may suggest aggression or impropriety in another. For example, while sustained eye contact is often associated with honesty in Western performance traditions, in certain Asian theatrical forms, such as Noh drama, averting the gaze signifies humility and reverence (Schechner 134). Consequently, the study of non-verbal communication in performance requires an interdisciplinary approach that combines semiotics, performance theory, and intercultural communication to decode these complex sign systems. This conceptualization positions non-verbal communication as a central, not supplementary, dimension of meaning-making in theatre and film, essential for understanding character embodiment, cultural specificity, and audience reception.

Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication encompasses all forms of human expression that do not rely on spoken or written language. It is a multifaceted system of conveying messages through bodily cues, spatial behavior, time management, physical appearance, and vocal characteristics. As scholars Mark L. Knapp and Judith A. Hall explain, non-verbal communication consists of several core components: kinesics, which refers to gestures, facial expressions, posture, and other body movements; proxemics, the use and perception of physical space; haptics, or the communicative function of touch; chronemics, the use and structuring of time in interaction; appearance, including clothing and grooming; and paralinguistics, which involves vocal elements such as tone, pitch, loudness, and speech rate that accompany spoken language but are not linguistic in themselves (Knapp and Hall 8).

Examples of Nonverbal Communication

A key study, "An Analysis of Non-verbal Performance in Theatre" by Pan, Alizadeh, and Suboh (2024), explores non-verbal elements through a semiotic and communicative lens. Nonverbal communication encompasses a wide range of expressive behaviors that convey meaning beyond spoken words. These include body posture, vocal tone, environmental cues, and symbolic objects, all of which play significant roles in human interaction.

- **Gestures**: They are purposeful movements of the hands, arms, or head that often reflect our emotional state. For instance, rapid or frequent gestures may indicate excitement or enthusiasm, whereas the absence of movement may signal sadness or withdrawal (Anderson 45).
- **Body language:** It further reveals internal states through posture, stance, and orientation. A person who is feeling down may exhibit closed posture – arms crossed, head lowered, while someone who is confident may maintain an upright posture, shoulders back, and direct eye contact (Knapp and Hall 83).
- **Paralinguistic cues**: This involves tone, pace, and fluency of speech, pitch, volume, which function as nonverbal indicators. Hesitations, stammering, or inconsistent speech patterns can reveal discomfort, nervousness, or even deception during a conversation (Guerrero et al. 112; Kendra 1).
- **Environmental features**: It includes how one arranges or decorates a personal space, communicate individual preferences, cultural values, and aspects of identity. The design of a room or workspace, for example, can reflect creativity, discipline, or openness (Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd 137).
- **Personal artifacts and appearance**: This includes clothing, accessories, tattoos, or piercings which serve as extensions of the self. These items signal affiliations, personal values, and even social or philosophical beliefs about modesty, identity, and expression (Knapp and Hall 129).
- **Facial Expressions:** A universal form of non-verbal communication, conveying emotions such as happiness, anger, surprise, or sadness, frequently preceding speech (Kendra 1) (Hall, Horgan, Terrence, Murphy, Nora 4). In visual media, the face – especially in close-up shots, serves as a powerful conduit for emotional storytelling.
- **Eye Behavior/Oculesics:** Covers eye contact, gaze direction, pupil responses, and eye movements, powerful tools for expressing intimacy, truth, deceit, or internal conflict (Stefan, Martijn, Theeuwes 679). In cinema, oculesics are amplified through framing and editing to enhance emotional resonance.
- **Appearance, Props, Makeup, Costume:** These visual elements signal character traits, status, era, or mood. In theatre, costume and makeup shape audience perception; in film, such design is integral to visual storytelling, often without verbal exposition (Pan, Alizadeh, and Suboh 1) (Alexandru 26).
- **Sound, Music, and Lighting (Environment & Atmosphere):** While not always categorized in classic non-verbal schemes, lighting and sound (including music and effects) reinforce mood, pace, and psychological tone, especially effective in theatre and film (Pan, Alizadeh, and Suboh 1).
- **Tactile communication**: This refers to non-verbal messages conveyed through physical touch, such as handshakes, hugs, linking arms, or a pat on the shoulder. These gestures carry culturally specific meanings. For instance, while the Romanian culture assigns particular interpretations to these gestures, other cultures vary greatly in their understanding. In Japan, a nod of the head can substitute for a handshake, whereas among the Inuit, a gentle shoulder tap may function as a greeting. Additionally, some individuals are uncomfortable with physical touch entirely. The intensity and type of contact are influenced by variables such as age, cultural background, relationship status, and the context of interaction (Tanase 15).

- **Personal Presence**: Non-verbal cues related to personal presence include body shape, attire, scent, and accessories. These elements communicate implicit messages about the individual's identity, status, and personality. Societal norms shape expectations based on body types, as classified by Birkenbihl into three main categories: ectomorphous (slender and tall), endomorphous (short and round), and mesomorphous (athletic and muscular). These types are associated with varying personality traits; for instance, ectomorphous individuals are often perceived as nervous and ambitious, while mesomorphous figures are seen as assertive and confident (Birkenbihl 5).
- **Proxemic Communication (Language of Space)**: The spatial aspect of communication involves five dimensions: size, intimacy, height, proximity, and the inside-outside dynamic. Each individual maintains a personal space zone, which adjusts depending on the relationship and communication context. According to Stanton, four main spatial zones can be identified:
    i. **Intimate Distance (0-0.5 meters):** Used in romantic or very close relationships. While acceptable in some cultures (e.g., European women), it may be deemed inappropriate among men or unfamiliar individuals.
    ii. **Personal Distance (0.5-1.3 meters):** Suitable for friends and acquaintances; allows privacy during conversation.
    iii. **Social Distance (1.2-3.5 meters):** Used in professional or casual interactions. It can also signify dominance or social hierarchy.
    iv. **Public Distance (3.5-8 meters):** Reserved for formal public interactions, such as political speeches or lectures, where separation emphasizes authority (Stanton 29).

Space also reflects social power – larger offices, podiums, or elevated desks signify higher status. For example, managers who distance themselves physically from others may favor autocratic leadership styles (Salanick and Pfeffer). Smaller, enclosed environments tend to feel more intimate and welcoming, while expansive, elaborately furnished rooms project authority and influence.

Color as a Communicative Tool

Color conveys psychological and cultural meaning. Warm colors like red stimulate communication, while cool colors tend to suppress it. Preferences in color can also reflect personality traits – extroverts lean towards bright hues, while introverts often favor subdued tones. Cultural interpretations differ widely: red symbolizes happiness in China but aggression in Japan; black signifies evil in some African cultures yet mourning in Europe; yellow may denote jealousy in Europe, intellect in the United States, and purity in Asia (Knapp and Hall 129; Stripp and Weiss 10).

Chronemics (Language of Time)

Time communicates values such as respect, power, and attention. Being punctual or tardy can suggest status differences or attitudes toward the recipient. For example, arriving late to a meeting may be interpreted as disrespectful or arrogant. Being made to wait often leads to feelings of inferiority, indicating the speaker's perceived superiority (Dinica 106). Moreover, time as a finite resource is a form of non-verbal expression. Prioritizing time for someone suggests importance, while neglect may communicate disinterest. The frequency of interaction also enhances

relationship quality. Time symbolism is observed in daily routines and rituals (e.g., fixed mealtimes, seasonal holidays), which structure communication and behavior.

Functions of Non-Verbal Communication

In this section, we will address five important functions that our nonverbal communication serves in interactions: we use it to convey meaning and provide information, regulate interactions, express our identities, indicate relational standing, communicate emotions, and express status and power. We use nonverbal communication to complement, substitute for, modify, or contradict verbal messages (Pamela, Heidi, and Murphy 6).

- **Complement:** We can use nonverbal communication to complement the accompanying verbal message. Obvious examples include a head-nod or a head-shake to complement the verbal messages of "yes" or "no." If a friend tells us that they recently received a promotion and a pay raise, we can show our enthusiasm in a number of verbal and nonverbal ways. We can exclaim, "Wow, that's great! I'm so happy for you!" while at the same time using our nonverbal communication to complement what we are saying by smiling and hugging them.
- **Substitute:** We can also use nonverbal communication to substitute for a verbal message. If someone asks you a question, instead of a verbal reply "yes", you may choose to simply nod your head without the accompanying verbal message. When we replace verbal communication with nonverbal communication, we use nonverbal behaviors that are easily recognized by others such as a wave, head-nod, or head-shake.
- **Modify:** While nonverbal communication can complement verbal communication, we also use it to modify the meaning of verbal communication by emphasizing certain parts of the verbal message. For instance, you may be upset with a family member and state, "I'm very angry with you." To accent this statement nonverbally you might say it, "I'm VERY angry with you," placing your emphasis on the word "very" to demonstrate the magnitude of your anger. In this example, it is your tone of voice (called paralanguage) that serves as the nonverbal communication accenting the message
- **Regulate Interactions:** We can use our nonverbal communication to regulate interactions. For example, if we are talking to someone and we want to show them we are interested in what they are saying and that they should continue, we can make eye contact, lean forward, and/or nod our heads. We do not generally end conversations by stating, "I'm done talking to you now" unless there is a breakdown in the communication process. However, if we are trying to get the other person to stop talking so that we can exit from the interaction, we might look at our phones or angle our bodies away from theirs.

Elements of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication consists of several key elements that complement or substitute verbal messages. These are:

- **Kinesics:** This includes body movements, gestures, posture, and facial expressions. Kinesics plays a crucial role in signaling attitudes, emotions, and reactions during interpersonal interactions (Knapp and Hall 57).

- **Proxemics:** It involves the use of space to convey meaning, such as maintaining personal distance for intimacy or expanding space to signify authority (Burgoon et al. 104).
- Haptics, or communication through touch: This communicates warmth, support, or dominance depending on the context and cultural norms. These elements highlight that much of human communication occurs beyond spoken language.
- **Paralanguage:** It encompasses vocal features like tone, pitch, and volume that modify the meaning of verbal messages without changing the actual words (Knapp and Hall 61).
- **Appearance and artifacts:** This includes clothing, hairstyle, and personal objects. It sends strong social and cultural signals, influencing how individuals are perceived in professional and social settings.
- **Chronemics, or the use of time in communication:** This can signify respect, status, and relational dynamics; for example, punctuality often reflects professionalism, while delays might suggest disregard (Ekman 12). Together, these elements - kinesics, proxemics, haptics, paralanguage, appearance, and chronemics form the foundation of nonverbal communication, shaping meaning and interaction in both personal and public contexts.

Major Proponents of Non-Verbal Communication in Theatre and Film

The study of non-verbal communication in theatre and film has been shaped by influential theorists who explored how gestures, facial expressions, proxemics, and visual symbols convey meaning beyond spoken dialogue. Major proponents such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud, Rudolf Laban, Charlie Chaplin, Jacques Lecoq and Peter Brook contributed groundbreaking techniques that emphasize the actor's physicality and visual storytelling as essential tools for audience engagement and narrative expression.

1. **Konstantin Stanislavski (1863 - 1938):** Stanislavski's system emphasized the actor's use of physical actions, gestures, and facial expressions to convey inner emotions. He believed that non-verbal behavior should arise naturally from a character's objectives, making performances believable and truthful. His ideas laid the foundation for method acting, where non-verbal cues (like posture and movement) are as vital as dialogue in creating authentic characters.
2. **Jerzy Grotowski (1933 - 1999):** Developed the concept of "Poor Theatre", which focused on the actor's body and voice as primary tools of expression, rather than elaborate sets or costumes. Grotowski encouraged the use of ritualistic gestures and body language to communicate meaning. He shifted attention to physicality and non-verbal storytelling, influencing experimental theatre worldwide.
3. **Antonin Artaud (1896 - 1948):** Known for the "Theatre of Cruelty", Artaud advocated for a theatre that communicates through physical gestures, sound, and movement, breaking away from reliance on text. His aim was to impact the audience's senses directly. His theories encouraged directors and actors to use non-verbal elements like screams, symbolic gestures, and movement to evoke emotional and psychological reactions.
4. **Rudolf Laban (1879 - 1958):** Rudolf is a movement theorist who developed "Laban Movement Analysis" (LMA), a system for analyzing and notating human movement. His work has been essential for choreographers and actors in understanding how movement conveys meaning. His ideas underpin much of physical theatre and actor training, helping performers explore expressive movement beyond spoken language.

5. **Charlie Chaplin (1889 - 1977):** A pioneer of "silent film", Chaplin mastered the art of storytelling through facial expressions, body language, and mime. His work showed how complex emotions and narratives can be conveyed without dialogue. Chaplin proved that non-verbal performance can be universally understood, shaping early cinema's reliance on physicality.
6. **Jacques Lecoq (1921 - 1999):** Lecoq founded an influential school of physical theatre and focused on mime, movement, and gesture as central to dramatic expression. His pedagogy taught actors to embody roles through dynamic physicality. Lecoq's training methods strongly impacted modern theatre, especially in devising and physical performance styles.
7. **Peter Brook (1925 - 2022):** Brook emphasized "visual imagery, silence, and movement" in storytelling, believing theatre communicates on a non-verbal and metaphoric level. His productions often minimized words to highlight gesture and space. His work demonstrated the power of non-verbal dramaturgy in both traditional and experimental theatre.

Non-Verbal Communication in Theatre

Theatre's dependence on non-verbal communication can be traced back to its earliest forms, long before spoken dialogue became central to performance. In ancient Greek theatre, actors wore large, stylized masks and employed exaggerated body gestures to amplify emotional expression and make characters visible and comprehensible even to those seated far from the stage. These masks not only signified character types but also facilitated emotional projection through non-verbal cues (Schechner 112). Likewise, in traditional Asian performance forms such as Japanese Noh and Indian Kathakali, elaborate costumes, makeup, and intricately codified movements, particularly hand gestures or mudras - conveyed nuanced meanings and emotional states. These gestures operate as a non-verbal language system, allowing performers to narrate complex stories without uttering a word (Schechner 113).

Physicality and Expression

In live theatre, an actor's body serves as a vital instrument of communication. Through posture, movement, gesture, and facial expression, performers construct character and mood in ways that often transcend spoken language. Peter Brook articulates this well when he asserts, "a single gesture on stage can evoke a world" (34). Physical theatre genres, such as mime and movement-based performances, exemplify this principle. Companies like Crown Troupe of Africa and Kiniso Theatre Company and many emerging avant garde theatre companies across Nigeria create performances where physicality assumes narrative prominence, with actors using the body to express psychological and social complexities in the absence or near absence of verbal dialogue. These forms emphasize that meaning in theatre can emerge from visual and kinetic expression as much as, if not more than, verbal articulation.

Space and Proxemics

The spatial arrangement of actors on stage - how they occupy, move through, and relate to the space around them, communicates unspoken messages about relationships, emotional states, and narrative tension. The concept of proxemics, introduced by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, is particularly relevant in theatre, where physical proximity or distance between characters can suggest intimacy, alienation, dominance, or submission. Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, in their

Viewpoints approach, identify spatial relationships and architecture as fundamental tools for creating meaning and dynamics on stage. According to them, "the tension between bodies in space, and their relation to the architecture of the stage, generates emotional and narrative resonance" (Bogart and Landau 54). For example, a character standing isolated in a vast, empty space may communicate loneliness or exile, while tightly clustered actors might suggest unity or conflict, depending on their posture and energy.

Non-Verbal Communication in Film

Film, as a visual medium, employs a range of tools such as camera angles, editing, lighting, and sound design, to accentuate non-verbal communication. These elements allow filmmakers to manipulate the viewer's attention and emotional response in ways that are distinct from live performance. One of the most significant tools in this respect is the close-up, which isolates a character's facial expression, intensifying its emotional impact. Slow motion can draw attention to subtle movements, such as a lingering glance or trembling hand, while montage sequences can juxtapose images to suggest relationships and emotions without spoken dialogue.

Film theorist Bela Balazs emphasizes the power of facial expression in cinema, famously asserting that "the language of the face is the most subjective form of visual communication" (Balazs 100). This concept was especially prominent during the silent film era, when actors relied entirely on gestures, expressions, and movement to convey character and plot. The medium's ability to capture the minutiae of facial shifts and bodily cues gives it a unique advantage in portraying internal states non-verbally.

From "Meaning and Nonverbal Communication in Films" (Ewata, 2016), we learn that Actors in film simultaneously employ tone, gesture, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues to convey meaning, frequently across cultural boundaries (Ewata 3). Such multimodal nonverbal communication acts as meta-communication, providing layers of meaning beyond dialogue, but can be counterproductive if misused or culturally misinterpreted (Ewata 3).

Iconic Examples

One of the most enduring examples of non-verbal storytelling is Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931). In this film, Chaplin's character, the Tramp, navigates love and hardship with little or no dialogue, using only his expressive face and choreographed physicality. The film's final scene, where the Tramp's expression subtly transitions from anxiety to hope upon being recognized by the blind girl he loves, remains a powerful testament to the narrative capacity of non-verbal performance.

Contemporary cinema also demonstrates the potency of physical expression. In *There Will Be Blood* (2007), Daniel Day-Lewis delivers a performance characterized by intense non-verbal cues. His character, Daniel Plainview, often communicates menace, desperation, and ambition through micro-expressions, posture, and physical silence. The restrained use of dialogue in several key scenes forces the viewer to focus on Day-Lewis's physicality, revealing complex emotional undercurrents without a single word.

Mise-en-scene and Symbolism

Non-verbal communication in film extends beyond actors' expressions and gestures to encompass mise-en-scene, the deliberate arrangement of visual elements within the frame. This includes everything from lighting and costume to color and spatial composition. These elements act as symbolic tools that guide interpretation and evoke emotion. Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List (1993) provides a poignant example of this technique. The film is predominantly shot in black and white, but the presence of a young girl in a red coat, seen wandering through the Krakow ghetto, stands out as a striking visual symbol. Her red coat, one of the film's few colored elements, represents innocence and becomes a haunting metaphor for the lives lost during the Holocaust. This visual cue carries enormous emotional weight and functions entirely without dialogue, exemplifying how non-verbal elements can define a film's thematic message (Spielberg 8).

Conclusion

Non-verbal communication in theatre and film is not merely an aesthetic addition; it constitutes a core element of performance that shapes narrative meaning and emotional depth. It functions in tandem with, or even in opposition to, spoken language to produce multidimensional storytelling. In theatre, codified gestures, spatial dynamics, and corporeal expressiveness convey intent and subtext, often transcending linguistic barriers. As Schechner observes, "performance must be understood as a broad spectrum of activity, in which gesture and embodiment play crucial roles" (112). Similarly, in film, tools such as close-ups, camera movement, and editing underscore the importance of silent expression. Bela Balazs underscores this by noting that "the language of the face" is a primary communicative force in cinema, capable of conveying interiority without dialogue (100).

These forms of non-verbal expression are not static; they evolve with technological innovation and shifting cultural paradigms. The rise of motion capture, virtual reality, and AI-enhanced performance tools indicates a future where bodily nuance and visual semiotics will take on even greater significance. Yet at their core, these techniques tap into a universal human sensitivity to gesture, rhythm, and presence. As Birdwhistell famously argued, only a small percentage of meaning in human interaction is transmitted through words, with the remainder expressed through non-verbal channels (Birdwhistell 47). Thus, whether in the ritualized choreography of a Noh performance or a single sustained cinematic glance, non-verbal communication remains an enduring and foundational language of performance.

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