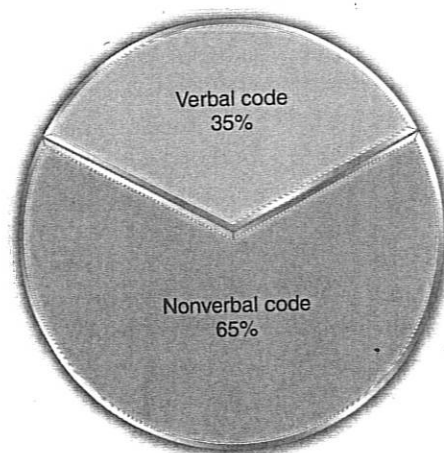


**W**e all communicate without saying a word and we all “speak” without talking. Nonverbal communication has been called the “unspoken dialogue” (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996), and scholars have noted its importance in conversations. Some researchers report that around 65 percent of overall message meaning is conveyed nonverbally (Hickson, Stacks, & Moore, 2004) (see Figure 5.1). Other researchers assert that nearly 93 percent of emotional meaning is conveyed nonverbally (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967).

When we attend to nonverbal behaviors, we draw conclusions about others, and others simultaneously draw conclusions about us. This process is part of the transactional nature of communication we discussed in Chapter 1. For instance, consider our opening story of Mark Mattson and his mother, Julia, who clearly have a close relationship. Instead of speaking aloud to Julia, Mark notes her nonverbal cues and makes various judgments. When deciding whether or not Julia should consider leaving her home, he observes her difficulty getting out of a chair and her dirty bathrobe. As he sits and reads the paper with her, he recalls an earlier time, and he remembers her voice and hugs.

The influence of nonverbal behavior on our perceptions, conversations, and relationships cannot be overstated. Although we are frequently unaware of our use of nonverbal communication, it is always present in our interac-

**Figure 5.1** Communication of interpersonal meaning



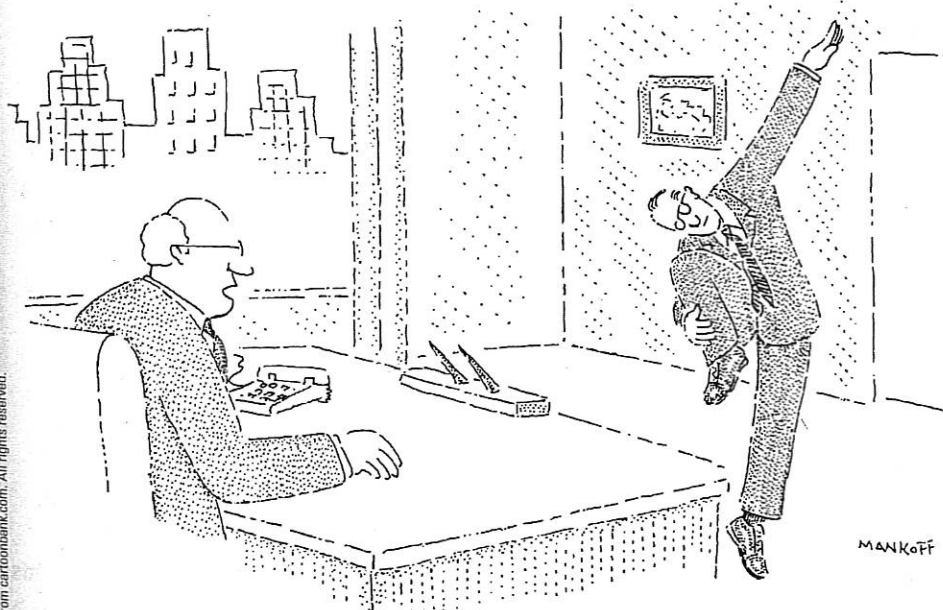
tions. Nonverbal communication is an integral part of the communication process and always a part of our relationships with others.

This chapter explores nonverbal communication and its importance in our lives. We focus our discussion on how nonverbal behavior functions, both directly and indirectly, in our daily activities. Before we move on in our discussion about nonverbal communication, let's spend a few moments defining it. **Nonverbal communication** encompasses all behaviors—other than spoken words—that communicate messages and have shared meaning between people. This definition has three associated parameters. First, electronic communication (a subject we return to in Chapter 11) is not included in our definition. Second, when we note that there is “shared meaning,” we are saying that a national culture agrees on how to construe a behavior. For example, in many co-cultures in the United States, when a parent sees a child do something unsafe, the parent might wag his or her index finger. The child must know the meaning behind this nonverbal shaming technique to respond to the parent's reprimand. Third, as we mentioned in Chapter 4, verbal and nonverbal communication usually work together to create meaning.

Nonverbal communication is central to our relational lives. Howard Giles and Beth Le Poire (2006) thoughtfully illustrate that the way people communicate nonverbally influences 1) how relationships are established, maintained, and dissolved, 2) the diagnosis of health-related problems such as autism, 3) the number of sexual partners a person has, 4) how babies show emotional distress, 5) marital satisfaction and stability, and 6) perceptions of beauty. These reasons are just a snapshot of why the area of nonverbal communication is valued and essential to discuss in a book on interpersonal communication.

#### **nonverbal communication**

*All behaviors other than spoken words that communicate messages and create shared meaning between people.*



*"Say what's on your mind, Harris—the language of dance has always eluded me."*

Nonverbal communication competence requires us to be able to encode and decode nonverbal messages (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002). We also have to use nonverbal communication ourselves to get across our meaning. Being able to adapt to people around you is a hallmark of a competent nonverbal communicator. **Interaction adaptation theory** suggests that individuals simultaneously adapt their communication behavior to the communication behavior of others (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995). Thus, the better we are able to adapt, the better we are able to understand the meaning of a message. Suppose, for example, that Rosa and her roommate, Nadine, are in a noisy place talking about a conflict they've had pertaining to their apartment's cleanliness. Nadine is practicing interaction adaptation if, when Rosa leans forward to talk about the topic, Nadine simultaneously leans forward to listen to the story. This "postural echo" suggests that Nadine is not only mirroring Rosa's behavior but that she is also trying to understand Rosa's meaning.

With our definition of nonverbal communication established, we're now ready to explore some of the principles of nonverbal communication before moving on to discuss nonverbal communication codes and cultural variations in nonverbal communication.

## Principles of Nonverbal Communication

Although it is often overlooked, nonverbal communication is a vital aspect of interpersonal communication. Consider times when we don't say a word but manage to "say" so much. Imagine, for example, hugging a close friend at her father's funeral. In this situation, nonverbal communication is probably more comforting than any words you could say. This apparent inconsistency of efficient communication without words is what makes nonverbal communication so important in our conversations with others. We now explore four principles of this type of communication.

### Nonverbal Communication Is Often Ambiguous

One reason nonverbal communication is so challenging in our relationships is that our nonverbal messages often mean different things to different people, which can lead to misunderstandings. Compared to verbal messages, nonverbal messages are usually more ambiguous. For example, suppose that Lena prolongs her eye contact with Todd and, in turn, Todd refocuses on Lena. While Lena may be showing some attraction to Todd, he may be returning the eye contact because he believes that something is wrong. Clearly, the same nonverbal behavior (eye contact) can elicit two different meanings.

Mark Hickson, Don Stacks, and Nina-Jo Moore (2004) capture the challenge of nonverbal communication by noting that it is more difficult to understand because it is intangible and more abstract. A major reason for this ambiguity is that many factors influence the meaning of nonverbal behav-

#### **interaction adaptation theory**

*A theory that suggests individuals simultaneously adapt their communication behavior to the communication behavior of others.*



iors, including shared fields of experience, current surroundings, and culture. Consider the following conversation between a father and son as they talk about the son's staying out past his curfew:

**Father:** Look, I told you to be home by 11! It's past midnight now. And get that smirk off your face!

**Son:** First, dad, you might have told me 11, but you also didn't say anything when I asked if I could stay out till 12. You didn't say anything for sure. I mean, like, you were changing the oil on the truck when I asked you. You didn't even look at me. I couldn't hear you that much while you were under the car. And, how am I...

**Father:** You heard what you wanted to hear. I told you...

**Son:** I swear, Dad. I thought my curfew was midnight. And I've stayed out till midnight before.

This scenario suggests a few things about the ambiguous nature of nonverbal communication. First, the father seems to be annoyed by his son's smirk. Is he truly smirking, or is the father misinterpreting his son's facial expression because he is angry? Second, the son took his dad's verbal message about the 11 p.m. deadline less seriously because his father neglected to make eye contact when delivering it. In addition, the son thought that his dad hesitated when he asked about a later curfew, and also claimed that he couldn't clearly hear his father's response from under the car, further eroding the power of the father's verbal communication. In this example, ambiguity results from the interaction of the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of both the father and son.



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*The ambiguity of nonverbal gestures can lead to misunderstandings. For example, if someone winks at you, is he flirting with you, letting you in on a joke, showing affection, or does he simply have something in his eye?*

## Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversation

People use nonverbal communication to manage the ebb and flow of conversations. Nonverbal regulators allow speakers to enter, exit, or maintain the conversation. Who talks when and to whom, referred to as **turn-taking**, is based primarily on nonverbal communication. For instance, if we want a chance to speak, we usually lean forward, toward the speaker. When we don't want to be interrupted in a conversation, we may avoid eye contact and keep our vocal pattern consistent so that others don't have an opportunity to begin talking until we are finished. When we are ready to yield the conversation to another, we typically stop talking, look at the other person, and perhaps make a motion with our hands to indicate that it is now okay for the other person to respond.

We can also yield the conversation floor by raising or lowering our pitch level to stress our last word or syllable. As we mentioned earlier, we are often unconscious of such behaviors. For example, let's say that Bruce, a student in Professor Brownstone's biology class, decides to challenge a grade. When Bruce arrives at Professor Brownstone's office, the straight-A student launches into a rehearsed, detailed story about not having enough time to study because he was sick with the flu. He avoids making eye contact with Professor Brownstone and doesn't pause to allow the professor to react until he has finished his entire memorized speech. As he finishes his last sentence, "I know that you have a policy on make-ups, but I think I have an extenuating situation," he looks up to meet the professor's eyes and raises the pitch level of his voice so that his statement almost becomes a question. Whether or not he realizes it, Bruce uses nonverbal communication to regulate the conversation with his professor. At first he prevents his professor from entering the exchange, and then he uses the pitch of his voice to yield the floor.

## Nonverbal Communication Is More Believable than Verbal Communication

Although, as we noted earlier, nonverbal communication is often ambiguous, people believe nonverbal messages over verbal messages. You've no doubt heard the expression "actions speak louder than words." This statement suggests that someone's nonverbal behavior can influence a conversational partner more than what is said. For instance, a job candidate being interviewed may verbally state her commitment to being professional, yet if she wears jeans and arrives late to the interview, these nonverbal cues will cause the interviewer to regard her statement with skepticism.

Consider how Esther reacts to the nonverbal communication of the customers at a local gas station where she is an attendant. She makes judgments about people based on their appearance. For example, Esther is more inclined to give the store's restroom key to someone who appears calm than to some-

### **turn-taking**

*In a conversation, nonverbal regulators that indicate who talks when and to whom.*

one who looks rushed, nervous, and sweaty. However, as we learned in Chapter 2, her perception may be inaccurate or incomplete.

## Nonverbal Communication May Conflict with Verbal Communication

Although nonverbal and verbal communication frequently operate interdependently, sometimes our nonverbal messages are not congruent with our verbal messages. We term this incompatibility a **mixed message**. When a friend asks you, "What's wrong?" after observing you with tears in your eyes, and you reply "Nothing," the contradiction between your nonverbal and verbal behavior is evident. When a physician frowns as she reveals to her patient that the prognosis "looks good," she gives a mixed message. Or, consider a wife, who after being asked by her husband if she loves him, shouts, "Of course I love you!" Most of us would agree that angrily shouting to express our affection sends a mixed message.

When confronted with a mixed message, people have to choose whether to believe the nonverbal or the verbal behaviors. Because children are generally not sophisticated enough to understand the many meanings that accompany nonverbal communication, they rely on the words of a message more than the nonverbal behaviors (Morton & Trehub, 2001). However, most children understand nonverbal messages such as shaking the head for "no" and a finger to the lips for "keep quiet." In contrast, adults who encounter mixed messages pay the most attention to nonverbal messages and neglect much of what is being stated. The multiple messages that originate from the eyes, voice, body movement, facial expressions, and touch usually overpower the verbal message.

To further explore how our nonverbal behaviors often conflict with our verbal messages, check out "Your Body Speaks Volumes, but Do You Know What It Is Saying?" available through InfoTrac College Edition. Use your online Resource Center for *Understanding Interpersonal Communication* to access **InfoTrac College Edition Exercise 5.1: What Is Your Body Language Saying?** To read about mixed messages in a specific context, business negotiations, access **Interactive Activity 5.1: Mixed Messages in Negotiations**.

### mixed message

*The incompatibility that occurs when our nonverbal messages are not congruent with our verbal messages.*

## REVISITING CASEINPOINT

1. Identify one principle of nonverbal communication and apply it to Mark Mattson's perception of his mother.
2. How has Julia Mattson's appearance regulated any conversation between Mark and her?

You can answer these questions online under the resources for Chapter 5 at your online Resource Center for Understanding Interpersonal Communication.

