

On Saying “Goodbye”

The *purpose* of this study was to describe leave-taking norms, in particular, to look at verbal and nonverbal behaviors associated with departures and to determine the effects of status and acquaintance on these behaviors. Knapp and his colleagues argue there are three functions of leave-taking: to signal inaccessibility, to signal supportiveness, and to summarize the interaction. They wanted to see how each is shown verbally and nonverbally.

Their *method* was to videotape students as they interviewed familiar or unfamiliar people of either the same status or higher. Subjects' concluding remarks and behavior were coded. Two types of categories were used: verbal and nonverbal. Some of the verbal categories coded the function of the concluding remarks (justifications or legitimizations of the leave-taking, appreciation or concern for the other's welfare, expressions of desire for future contact). Others recorded the forms of the utterance (whether it was a filler, a reinforcement, or a buffer such as “uh” or “well”). Nonverbal categories included changes in body position, movements of the limbs, eye contact, smiling, and so on.

The *results* indicated that status and acquaintance had little effect on leave-taking. In general, leave-taking was shown verbally by increases in professional inquiry (How long have you been a major?), reinforcement (Yeah), buffing (Well), and appreciation (I really want to thank you). Nonverbally, leave-taking was signaled by breaking eye contact, left-positioning, forward lean, and head nodding. The major status difference was that the low-status partner did more reinforcement and buffing. More reinforcements also occurred between those previously acquainted than between strangers.

Nonverbal behaviors peaked during the 15 seconds prior to standing. The authors suggest, “In the light of such patterns, it is easy to see why we often become frustrated if we are not ‘released’ after rising. Such an interpersonal denial means that we must go through the whole routine again!”

Analysis showed the presence of only two of the leave-taking functions: signaling inaccessibility and support for the relationship. Little summarizing took place, although this could have been due to the college atmosphere. While the majority of nonverbal cues signaled inaccessibility, indications of warmth, approval, and affiliation were either directly verbalized or indicated nonverbally. The authors conclude: “Perhaps because we feel that the termination of an interaction may be perceived as a threat to terminate the relationship, we humans go through a veritable song-and-dance when taking leave of our fellows.”

Source: Mark L. Knapp and others, “The Rhetoric of Goodbye: Verbal and Nonverbal Correlates of Human Leave-Taking,” *Speech Monographs*, 40 (August 1973), 183-98.