

How Much Social Meaning Is Nonverbal?

In 1967, Mehrabian published two highly influential studies. His *purpose* was to determine the relative impact of verbal and nonverbal channels when used together and to see how much meaning is due to vocal, facial, or verbal cues. He hypothesized that nonverbal channels would convey more meaning than verbal channels, under certain conditions.

In the first study, Mehrabian compared content meaning with meaning based on vocal tone. His *method* was to present three kinds of words (words with positive, neutral, and negative verbal meanings) in three different tones (indicating liking, neutrality, or disliking). All possible combinations were presented so that, in most of the conditions, the verbal and vocal channels were inconsistent with one another. By asking subjects to rate the speakers attitude toward a hypothetical receiver, he felt he could determine if subjects responded primarily to the verbal or the vocal meaning.

His first task was to choose the words. On the basis of pretest ratings he chose as positive the words: honey, thanks, and dear; as neutral: maybe, really, and oh; and as negative: don't, brute, and terrible. He then recorded two speakers saying each word three times using positive, neutral, or negative tones. One third of the subjects were asked to attend only to word meaning, one third, only to vocal meanings, and one third to all of the information.

The *results* were as follows. In the first condition (attend to word meanings), the verbal channel had the largest effect. In the second (attend to tone), the vocal channel was most important, although content also played a part. In the third condition (attend to both), the effects of tone were primary. Mehrabian concluded that attitude judgements of single word inconsistent messages are based primarily on vocal tone.

In the second study, Mehrabian added a third channel, the face. Here he chose one word: maybe. He recorded two speakers saying the word positively, neutrally, or negatively. He accompanied their tape with photographs displaying positive, neutral, or negative facial expressions. Subjects were exposed to all combinations of vocal tone and facial expression. They then estimated speaker's attitude. The effects of the facial component were significantly greater than those of the vocal.

Mehrabian concluded, from these studies, that "the combined effect of simultaneous verbal, vocal, and facial attitude communications is a weighted sum of their independent effects – with the coefficients of .07, .38, and .55, respectively." Although it is unclear how he arrived at these numbers, they have been widely accepted and interpreted as indicating that 93 percent of all communicative meaning is nonverbal. This interpretation is not warranted by the studies, which used one-word messages in a laboratory setting.

To conclude that in all cases vocal and facial cues provide more information than verbal cues is an odd conclusion, one that illustrates how careful we should be in extrapolating from experimental research.

Source: Study 1: Albert Mehrabian and Morton Wiener, "Decoding of Inconsistent Communications," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 6 (1967), 109-14. Study 2: Albert Mehrabian and Susan R. Ferris, "Influence of Attitudes from Nonverbal Communication in Two Channels," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 31 (1967), 248-52.