



Body Language

The Body Language of Proxemics

A fascinating area in the nonverbal world of body language is that of spatial relationships, or proxemics, the study of man's appreciation and use of space. As a species, man is highly territorial but we are rarely aware of it unless our space is somehow violated. Spatial relationships and territorial boundaries directly influence our daily encounters. Maintaining control over such space is a key factor in personal satisfaction; observing spatial interactions in everyday life is a key to personal awareness.



Background

The term "proxemics" was coined by a researcher E.T. Hall in 1963 when he investigated man's use of personal space in contrast with "fixed" and "semi-fixed" feature space. Fixed feature space is characterized by unmovable boundaries (divisions within an office building) while semi-fixed feature space is defined by fixed boundaries such as furniture. Informal space is characterized by a personal zone or "bubble" that varies for individuals and circumstances. While the use of each of these spatial relationships can impede or promote the act of communication, the area that humans control and use most often is their informal space. This zone constitutes an area that humans protect from the intrusion of outsiders. The study of spatial territory for the purpose of communication uses four categories for informal space: the intimate distance for embracing or whispering (6-18 inches), the personal distance for conversations among good friends (1.5-4 feet), social distance for conversations among acquaintances (4-12 feet), and public distance used for public speaking (12 feet or more).

Behavioral study indicates that individuals perceive a distance that is appropriate for different types of messages; they also establish a comfortable distance for personal interaction and nonverbally define this as their personal space. Research supports the hypothesis that the violation of this personal space can have serious adverse effects on communication. Thus, if an individual is to be mutually satisfied in a communication encounter, his/her personal space must be respected. Should an intruder invade this personal space while also trespassing within territorial boundaries he placed himself in double jeopardy and must compensate for the other's increased anxiety.



Territory at the Office

Territorial claims differ from personal space in that the personal zone accompanies the individual while territoriality is relatively stationary. Semi-fixed feature space is often the criteria used to establish a territory within any environment; it becomes a man's safety zone where he rests from the rigors of defending personal space from invasion, the dramatic or sudden entry into another's personal zone. Humans, like animals, indicate their ownership of this established territory and will consequently defend it against all invasions. Territoriality is established so rapidly that even the second session in a series of lectures is sufficient to find most of the audience returning to their same seats. And if one has been sitting in a particular seat and someone else occupies it, one can notice a fleeting irritation. Long-term territory takes on the control of the occupant. This public personal zone, such as an office at work, becomes defended territory, however subtle the defense might be. What is the instant, involuntary reaction should you arrive at the office only to find someone else sitting at your desk?

Another worthwhile example of such proxemic concepts is that of stepping behind the desk of an associate at work and invading the personal zone. If it's the boss, do you really have that leeway? If it's your good buddy -- you probably do. An office desk is a primary tool in establishing spatial communications and the native's liberty to place that desk where and how he/she desires is a key element in personnel considerations. The office cubicles so often found in large companies do not lend themselves to allowing the occupant to rearrange furniture to allow for personal preferences. Nor are they always large enough to allow for a visitor's chair - another proxemic key. An extra chair to a pool employee can easily become a symbol of status -- professional reason for having visitors. The proxemic key resides in where the chair is placed, and in what relation to the desk. There are several basic arrangements for the desk:

- occupant is enthroned and protected from intrusion on three sides (corner)
- occupant's back faces the entryway (in order to look out the window?)
- occupant allows entry and space at front and one side of desk.

From these basics the reader can interpret most derivative arrangements.

Consideration of just these proxemics communicates an attitude of the occupant. One reinforces a sense of control, or protecting the rear and/or flank; the next is the most vulnerable of arrangements, given that all that happens within is exposed to whomever is approaching before the occupant might be aware of the approach; the last tends to be the most comfortable for both guest and occupant -- the occupant can maintain control over the territory, yet share the maximum social zone. Some consideration should also be given to what side (if only one) of the desk is left open to the public. Is it the right side, reflecting a conscious acceptance, or the left side and indicating a subconscious openness or vulnerability? Should there be two chairs in such an open office, the chair closest to the occupant's is the next point of proxemic control. Should one want to have control of a meeting, have it on home ground, with a proxemic design pre-establishing the communication flow of the room.

Physical barriers such as desks, chairs, and partitions are not always necessary to convey the protection of personal space; we seem forever conscious of our intimate zone and its violations. Examples: the butler who doesn't listen to the conversations of the guests, the pedestrian who avoids staring at an embracing couple, or the person who becomes preoccupied with a magazine during another's nearby telephone conversation. They all show some awareness of communication property rights and will adjust both their body language and proxemics to relay that message.



Keeping Our Distance

Americans have a pattern that discourages physical contact, except in moments of intimacy. When we ride on a subway or crowded elevator we will "hold ourselves in", having been taught

from early childhood to avoid bodily contact with strangers. Research has indicated that Americans are especially conscious of their personal space and allow much less intrusion than do other nationalities, even with those people considered to be friends. There are times, however, that we not only seek but relish basking in the group energy of large crowds. The group energy of a crowd at a sports, music, or celestial event can continue to influence the native's sense of personal space long after the event is over. Sometimes we find ourselves just tolerating the invasion of personal space for the sake of the event or task at hand. Next time you find yourself waiting in a cashier or ticket line, observe the interactions of intimate and personal zones.

Changing the distance between two people can convey a desire for intimacy, declare a lack of interest, or increase/decrease domination. Police interrogators have been taught that this violation of personal space can nonverbally convey a message; they are often use the strategy of sitting close and crowding a suspect. This theory of interrogation assumes that invasion of the suspect's personal space (with no chance for defense) will give the officer a psychological advantage.

Not only is a vocal message qualified and conditioned by the handling of distance, but the substance of a conversation can often demand special handling of space. Spatial changes give a tone to a communication, accent it, and at times even counteract the spoken word. There are certain thoughts that are difficult to share unless one is within the proper conversational zone. The telling of a secret at a distance of 20 feet, for example, is not only difficult but negates the confidentiality of the message itself. Another example might be one who enters an office and stands as opposed to the seated occupant. Even without the manipulation of invading personal space, such dominant body language influences potential conversation on a subconscious level. The further the stance, the less dominant.

The proxemics of the home is an interesting study. First there is the consideration of social zones within a personal environment. Some rooms are acceptable for public gatherings, others for close friends and relatives, some are even considered off-limits to certain family members, some are left untouched, preserved, and ready for only occasional occupancy. Focusing on the social room, the seating arrangement in a living room presents more difficult proxemics when it revolves around a television set. Rooms with a linear or curved seating alignment are not conducive to small, intimate gatherings. When we talk we like to face each other. If forced to sit side by side, our body language will try to compensate for this lack of eye-to-eye contact by leaning in shoulder-to-shoulder. The most common feature space for such direct contact is usually the kitchen or dining room table. The proxemics of the furniture itself and how it defines our use of distance establishes a key factor in what we consider to be a cozy, comfortable, family atmosphere.

There are hundreds of correlations between proxemics and the intended communication process. The simplest forms of social activity are procedure and rituals. Man constantly processes input data based on the current environment and its relationship to the native and the event so that he might determine the correct response to the procedure or ritual. Where he places himself and how he establishes his feature space can and does influence that response.



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