

The Making of a Successful Speech: A Research Study Arguing the Importance of Body Stance

Author: Daniel Aizenman

The Argument: Body language as a form of literacy

It's the 2008 Paralympics. The gun has already been shot and athletes are sprinting down the line. Libby Clegg, a blind competitor is running as fast as she can and crosses the finish line second. Overjoyed and filled with happiness, she shouts while simultaneously arching her back and throwing her hands in the air as pride fills her heart. But who taught Libby to throw her hands in the air when feeling accomplishment? Why would a blind women feel the need to display a body gesture? Body language is an innate part of every human being that is often overlooked. In many Literacy courses, professors will teach their students how to understand and convey messages through many different forms of writing. Some will even venture into having their students write a two minute speech. However, the importance and power of body gestures and stance is ignored. We use our body to convey when we are sad, frustrated, furious. Content, confident, conceited. Body movements are a crucial part of literacy when it comes to successfully conveying your ideas to others.

The Curiosity: Questions we raise

Speech is not only made up of the voice we have and the tone we use. Justine Castell, a human-human conversation teacher and researcher at Carnegie Mellon stated; "that speech and gesture join together to convey the communicative intent of a speaker" (14). When presenting a speech, our voice and our body are used harmoniously. One relies on the other to successfully carry a point across. Adam Kendon, a graduate from both Oxford and the University of Cambridge for biology and experimental psychology, states in *Studies in Dyadic Communication*, why both body motion and speech are so important to one another. "Such an (analysis) is seen as preliminary to any understanding of the functions in a speaker, whether from the point of view of its function in communication or its possible role in the process of speech production" (179). By taking into consideration how body movement might even be part of speech production, we now see how crucial it is to learn body gestures for a proper speech. If teachers understood that body movement is strong enough to even create the words in your speech, they could then understand why body stance should be included as a topic in preliminary writing courses. Kendon claims it goes further to do so much more during a speech, bringing even more importance to body movement as a whole. This concept then draws up the question, why do we use body gestures in the first place? "Gesture conveys those concepts for which it is best suited (concepts that can be mapped onto space, or that are more easily expressed through a medium that allows simultaneity than a medium that depends on linearity)" (14). Castell tells us that only so much can be explained over voice. We use gestures to explain concepts that require an extra dimension of complexity. With gestures, we are able to speak while explaining our thoughts at the same time. We can give our audience the information hidden between the lines of our speech. This draws up even more questions, such as what information can be portrayed using body gesture as an aid? After years of research, Castell

feels “Gesture and speech may redundantly express concepts that are difficult to convey, or that the speaker believes the hearer will have difficulty understanding”(16). With gestures, a speaker can draw to attention the more complex thoughts or ideas of their speech to the audience. Like voice, a gesture is used to explain a thought or an idea. However, body gestures come in unison with a speaker’s body stance.

This brings up an entirely new issue, what is the difference between body gestures and body stance? We understand that the idea of body gesture is to better explain the words we say and what we mean by them. Body stance can be best described by the linguistic anthropologist Professor Jaffe, who defines body stance in her book, *Stance: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, as “Positionality: how speakers and writers are necessarily engaged in positioning themselves” (4). While gestures are used to explain the information and add further details to it, body stance or positionality help bring out the tone or mood of the speech. “(B)ecause individual identities are defined within social formations, by taking up a position, individuals automatically invoke a constellation of associated social identities” (8). The stance we take while in conversation with others will subliminally cause the other person in the conversation to gain a certain sense or mood of us and the conversation as a whole. In fact, the power of body stance is so immense that Amy Cuddy, a professor and researcher of body language at Harvard Business School, gave a speech called *Your body language shapes who you are*, explaining how just standing in an empowering pose for three minutes a day can make anyone feel more confident in themselves and more successful in their jobs. Body stance effects both the speaker and the listener, which is why body stance is crucial to a successful speech.

With body stance explained, another issue forms. What is the proper body stance in order to have a successful and inspirational speech? More specifically, what body stance should be taken in order to set a specific tone or mood during a successful or inspirational speech? This is the research question I approached and hoped to answer. My goal was to use TED talks to show that body stance is a crucial literacy component that cannot be ignored because of its use during speech to set specific moods.

Research Methods: How to answer the question at hand

The world is filled with successful and inspirational speeches, but there are few places where everyone will go to see a speech and feel inspired or learn an idea worth spreading. One of these places is TED. TED is a nonprofit devoted to spreading and teaching ideas ranging from learning how to be happy from a monk to understanding the wonders of tree perspiration in the Amazon. No matter the TED talk, each speaker somehow has the power to pull anyone who watches into their idea. What makes the TED talker great at their speech is not the words they use (for some have little English speaking skills), but rather how they portray it. This is why TED talks were used to research body stance. The TED talks chosen for research were the most viewed TED talks to ensure they were truly successful and inspirational while portraying their point.

The research collected for this study was designed to see if different moods tend to use body stances in different ways when the gestures are portrayed and how often the speaker is willing to use gestures during each mood setting. For example, if someone feels as though they are sharing happy information while talking about a firework, their body might tend to open up and exaggerate the hand gestures. Instead, someone frightened with what has happened might arc their elbows inward and show a more protected stance when portraying the same gesture of

a firework going off. By researching body stance and movement, we are also able to see the consistent stance of bodies during speeches.

First, I chose 12 moods I believed to be more prominent during speeches to observe. However, once data collection began, the 12 moods quickly turned into six once I realized that certain moods, such as sadness, are never brought up during the inspirational speeches. The six moods chosen are the moods that the speaker feels and is trying to portray to the audience. Happy is when something has made them smile or even laugh. Curiosity is when the speaker feels as though something may be drawing so many questions and there is so much left to understand, sparking personal thoughts. Informative is still using inspirational and successful speaking, but specifically to get points or facts across. Confident was described as when the speaker is confident about what they are saying or feels confident speaking to the audience or felt confident in the situation they were explaining. Vulnerable was when the speaker was sharing something that made them vulnerable and was hard to share in the past until they managed to overcome an inner struggle. Mad was when the speaker tried to explain why they may have been initially mad or frustrated with their past self or someone else. Every TED talk is made to draw you in and be inspirational, so that is a given to each of these successful speeches.

Along with the mood, the amount of movement of legs, body, arms, and head was collected on a scale of 1-4. 1 was still, 2 some movement, 3 average movement, and 4 a lot of movement. Stance was also collected on a number scale. 1 stood for a standard, upright position. 2 signified an inward stance as if the speaker was pulled into their own body. 3 signified an outwards stance as if the speaker was opening up large for gestures, the opposite of 2. 4 stood for when the body movement was specifically emphasized during the talk in order to portray a point. Every minute two numbers were recorded for leg, arm, body, and head. Each minute the mood of the speech was also collected along with the overall mood of the speech. Over 100 minutes of Ted talk were observed. The section with the most data came to be informative. However, the data as a whole came out with many interesting correlations.

The Data: What Was Recorded

On the excel file provided is all the data collected. It can be accessed through the link or through the downloadable excel sheet provided with the *Researching Literacy* page of my Wordpress portfolio. The *Talk Sheet*, sheet 1, shows The TED talk used with link, location, date filmed, and speaker information. It also provides the overall mood of the speech in the second to last column and whether or not the collected data was used for the study. Some clips are included in this research paper in the discussion section. If interested in viewing the entire speech of the clipping, the speech can be accessed from the site to the left of the author's name. If the data originally collected was not used, it was because the camera operator went too often to the presenter's slides or the speaker's movements were too hard to follow in order to collect proper data. The *Data*, sheet 3, shows every minute collected and kept for use in the research along with what mood the minute pertained to as seen to the right. The first set of "leg, body, arm, head" pertain to the total movement of the body section while the second set is the recorded number for stance. To the left is mean stance movement per mood then observations of body stance per mood. The *Recording Chart*, sheet 2, is an example chart used to collect data on the minute intervals.

Discussion: A Deep Analysis to an Important Concept

So, how do we use body stance to set mood and create a successful speech? The most important thing to note is that no matter the mood a speaker was trying to portray, they always had at least some movement. No speaker stood still or quiet while presenting, showing the importance of movement during speech. Another interesting observation is that no matter the mood of the speech, body stance does not remain static throughout the entire speech. At some point in every mood, the speaker will either emphasize or reposition their body in order to fit their speech.

Besides the generalizations across portraying mood successfully in speeches, how body stance was used played a huge key role in distinguishing between moods. Interestingly enough, body stance being faced inward or outward almost strictly occurred only in negative moods, such as mad and vulnerable. When someone tried to act enraged or mad they would distinctly throw their body and arms in an outward motion while using their legs for emphasis only, as seen with Richard to the right. When a speaker was displaying vulnerability they would have a related inward motion of the arms with elbows coming towards the body core, as seen to the left by Camerron Russell. For vulnerability, the body and head became used more for emphasis while the legs actually bent the knees inward towards the body center. If mad, the body was used for stance with legs rarely used for stance, while for vulnerability, the legs were used for displaying stance along with arms and head, rarely body. Mad also had a large leg, body, and head movement. Vulnerability had much less body movement, even less than average, having extra movement for arms. Vulnerable and confident had many similarities in body movements while happy and mad had similar ratios of the amount of body movement.



Cameron Russell during Her 'Looks aren't everything' speech sharing personal information and giving a vulnerable mood to the audience. Her arms come inward during gestures and her chin brought closer towards her chest, another inward body stance.



Richard St. John during his 'Success is a continuous journey' speech trying to portray being frustrated and giving a mad mood. Elbows almost always faced outward giving all gestures and outward stance. Body even arched giving an outward body stance, making his problems feel big. Legs, hard to see, are spread outward during gestures for an outward body stance.

Curiosity was a very intriguing mood that stood out from all the others in many ways. It distinctly had an excessive amount of emphasis with every body part for every body stance, as seen by Jill Bolte Taylor to the right. This comes as no surprise, since curiosity requires more understanding in order to spark questions in the audience's mind. The speaker needs the aid of their body to explain euphoric events or inspiring thoughts. Arm movement was extensive and still moments in the body were done for specific reasons. Curiosity was the most intense body involvement out of all the moods observed.



Dr. Taylor during her speech 'My stroke of insight' trying to explain the beauty of temporarily having her left brain lobe shut down. Here she is specifically attempting to set the curiosity mood. Body stance is being used for emphasis. Elbows outward, but specifically exaggerated for gesture along with a stretching neck and facial expression to go with her oral explanation, all adding to an emphasized body stance.



Julian Treasure during 'How to speak so that people will listen'. He is displaying a standard body stance with everything in line and straight even during his hand gestures. He used this along with little emphasis and average movement to give distinguish a confident tone from happy and informative.

Interestingly, informative, happy, and confident mood setting all displayed extremely similar body stance with minimal differences. Each mood only used a change in standard body stance strictly for emphasis or acting out a scene, as seen by Julian Treasure to the left. Otherwise, there was little to no deviation with inward or outward body movements, the opposite of mad and vulnerable. At a glance, their initial body stance seems similar. However, once body stance movement is taken into account, the differences between them become more prominent. Setting a successful happy mood was done with a lot of average body movement during stance from head to toe, similar to that of setting a mad mood. Informative calmed leg and body movements while giving more movement to arm and head gestures. In fact, head gestures were distinctly used during their body stances as a way to mark important sentences. By stilling legs and the body, arm gestures and head movement during stance became more meaningful and powerful. Confident had a similar ratio of movement with arm and head being emphasized and can be seen most prominently during Julian Treasure's speech. However, it was distinct from informative in that there was more movement overall in general.

Conclusion: Takeaway Points from a Long Discussion

By observing successful and inspirational speeches while recording mood and body stance changes, many of the secrets to a good speech revealed their selves. The main tip we learned is that a body is never static. By allowing body stance to flow, we give ourselves a new tool to use in a speech. If preliminary English courses taught these simple skills to students, a once two dimensional form of expression now becomes dynamic.

The evidence is compelling, yet easy enough to summarize in a single paragraph. Having a lot of body stance movement while only manipulating stance changes for emphasis became a successful way to give a happy mood during a speech. If outward stance was observed with the same movement, an emotion of rage or the feeling of being mad surfaced. By lowering movement and allowing the stance of limbs to come inward a speaker can give the sense of vulnerability. Taking away all subliminal stance changes and increasing body emphasizing stances from head to toe will give the ambience of curiosity. By giving less emphasis but keeping body stance movement equal, a speaker will give off a confident vibe. Lastly, slowing body stance movement allowed for a more informative, yet inspirational, speech.

Body language may often be overlooked and not taught in many preparatory English classes. However, it is something easy enough teach with the right information. As proven by many successful speakers, body stance is all it takes to elevate the level of our speaking skills. With these simple findings in body stance, a speech can go from bland and boring to exciting enough for TED.

Works Cited

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