

TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF BODY LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The concept of the Language of Body is analyzed based on literature. The attempts of its theoretical explanation are discussed. The Psychology of Set (Uznadze) is considered as having potential for further research and better understanding of the phenomenon.

Keywords: Body language, paralinguistic properties, emotion theories, Dimitri Uznadze, Psychology of Set

Introduction

The concept of body language is among the most popular topics discussed nowadays. Like other concepts, appearing in different contexts, the term tends to be polysemantic – in addition to its denotative meaning, it also has various contextual implications which, if summarized, form the following general definition: body language is a meaningful pattern of physical parameters of personality functioning; the pattern that has its own semantics, pointing out something more besides these physical parameters and, at the same time, something different from them. Stemming from its nature, the language of body has become the focus of interest in different spheres – both academic and practical.

According to the one of the most common understandings of body language, relation between a somatic sign (symbol) and its signified is twofold. On the one hand, the relation is certainly conditional, formed by the tradition established in corresponding culture, but on the other - the signified could acquire some broader meaning, implying anything beyond the “agreed” content. From this viewpoint, verbal language could also be seen as a variety of body language with *the signifier* (a combination of human sounds or graphic forms) and *the signified* (that can appear to be any piece of reality). A clear example of conventional body language is gesture language for people with hearing and speaking deficiency, as it is the language which is “spoken” by movements with unlimited semantics. Cult rituals are also

conventional and have wide semantic spectrum as well. These phenomena are the subject of semiotics and are explained, in general, through conventionality.

More specific understanding of body language stays with paralinguistics – with those nonverbal elements which accompany and facilitate verbal (spoken) communication, including voice, timbre and intonation, gestures and facial expression. The significance of gestures and intonation in public speech was recognized yet by Greek and Roman rhetors. British physician J. Bulwer was the first who wrote about gestures as *natural* vehicles of information, comparing them to *artificial* verbal language (J. Bulwer, 1644/1974).

Paralinguistic features are mostly conventional and any speaker is aware that they are just the means for communication. Therefore, it seems justified both to call them “body language” and to study them in a linguistic manner: identifying semantics for separate signs, compiling dictionaries for different cultures and so on. (D. Morris, 2002). At the same time, we can use paralinguistic means impulsively, without any realization of its communicative function or conventional meaning. Thus, paralinguistic language could be considered conventional only partly.

In general, there is a need for psychological interpretation of paralinguistic elements. What is behind them? Why this additional language exists in parallel with verbal language? Why it is differently represented in different situations and different cultures? It is known that the usage of paralinguistic means intensifies with growth of personal emotionality. Correspondingly, it is more characteristic to emotional (southern) cultures. Therefore, conventionality could not be the only matter behind paralinguistics, for better understanding of this phenomenon psychological nature of emotions should be also considered (M. Argyle. 2010).

New meaning to body language was added following the research of social relationships, in particular – observation of human actions, physical ones, which convey information on the actor and influence relationships. Such understanding of body language is very popular with practitioners, working with different social groups. In this context, the spectrum of body language signs has become broader to include human posture, movements, use of space and even image-making. While using these elements, person mostly does not realize that s/he unintentionally conveys information about herself/himself to others. Some researchers (Paul Ekman, 2003, Alan & Barbara Pease, 2004) argue that comprehension of unconscious language of body is both – the means to uncover other person’s hidden intention and the means to influence other people. However, in such cases, it is not fully justified to use the term “body language”, referring to this phenomenon since “language” is such system of signs which is intentionally aimed at

communication whereas in social relationships body reveals information unintentionally. Thus, “body language” is rather metaphor here (cf. “Language of nature”). However, practitioners seldom pay attention to respective terminological nuances, neither look they for relevant theoretical explanations. Abundance of theories related to body language is seen in another context related to non-verbal communication.

The relation of body and mind (psyche) most intensively was studied in psychology of emotions. The problem of emotions brings a new version of body language meaning – in this context body changes mostly imply person’s inner somatic processes which form feelings of this person. This connection of soma and psyche is unconscious and no conventionality could be brought into it. Intensive generation of respective models started in the second half of the 19th century when Charles Bell presented the first [neuro] physiological explanation of emotions. Ch. Darwin, on the basis of unity of mimics in humans and animals, put forward a hypothesis of development of human emotions from animal emotions. Ernst Kretschmer put somatic constitution as a basis for classification of types or temperament (Hippocrates also considered temperament as psychosomatic).

The role of body in emotions was particularly underlined by psychologist W. James and physiologist C. Lange who independently from each other proposed the theory according to which emotion is experience of bodily changes reflected in interoception. This was the first explanatory model which cannot be ignored by anyone studying emotions. It is worth noting that Hans Selye and Walter Cannon’s theories of stress were formed in “debates” with James-Lange. In this process, some other hypotheses were tested but finally it became clear that it is not body that makes the basis for emotional experience but confluence of body and its cognition generates emotion (Cannon-Bard neurophysiological model, Schachter's experiments in social psychology and his two-factor theory of emotions). It might seem that theory problem is solved here, however, only - partly.

To conclude, both attempts of explanations – past and modern – are problematic from theoretical point of view. This is the problem that frequently arises in the field of psychology and therefore it is worth to focus on. To bring an analogy: scientific cognition standards are usually set in natural sciences. In accordance with these standards: *ad hoc* hypotheses have been criticized throughout the history of physics. Nevertheless, they appear nowadays too as theoretical models which stem not from general paradigm but are constructed to explain one, certain, concrete fact [Philosophy, 2004]. They usually evoke criticism because in such cases it becomes impossible to reconcile the research object and scientific laws which is an essential condition for complete understanding. *Ad hoc* hypothesis indicates on

shortcomings of the applied paradigm and it often becomes the very reason to change it.

If we look at theories of emotions discussed above from this viewpoint, they look as *ad hoc* hypotheses in relation to behavioral paradigm; they prepare basis to form new, cognitive paradigm, however ... cognitive approach has not succeeded since the 1960-ies and up to now could acquire the form of paradigm. The principle of cognition and soma (body) unity appears only with the topics related to emotions (namely - emotions, motivation, stress, psychosomatic disturbances, psychotherapy), with other topics of modern psychology this principle is less seen. Thus, regardless reasons existing behind it, it is clear that theories of emotions (like many other psychological theories) belong to the group of *ad hoc* hypothesis. Therefore, they have weak explanatory potential since it is impossible to reconcile them with general regularities. We will be able to get satisfactory explanation of emotions only when the explanation model will appear as just a separate case of general psychological regularities.

There is also another current of interest towards body language which is related to in-depth psychology and psychoanalysis – in particular. Wilhelm Reich, Sigmund Freud's pupil, stemmed from Freud's idea that neurosis caused body tension and concluded that character rigidities were also manifested in muscular tensions. He described chronic muscular tension as "somatic or muscular armor", The "armors" appear when people block their unwanted sexual aspirations or emotions. Reich concluded that neurosis could be treated by removing muscular tension and thus he was the first to start mind-body therapy, building foundation for further development of body-oriented psychotherapies. To soften "somatic and muscular armor" Reich used physical exercises, breathing, massage, postures. At the same time, he was very attentive to explain the psychological meaning of these procedures to his patients.

Alexander Lowen, Reich's pupil, developed a method of bioenergetics analysis, In 1958 he published his first book "The Language of the Body" and actually introduced this term in psychotherapy [A. Lowen, 1971]. The essence of Lowen's therapy lies in teaching people to listen to their bodies, understand the language bodies speak, establish harmonious relations with their own bodies and free themselves from neurotic rigidities. Lowen and his therapeutic group constantly investigated relation between tension in various segment of the body and concrete psychological problem.

Another school that developed on the basis of Reich's ideas is David Boadella's biosynthesis school (D. Boadella, 1987) which relates psychological structures with embryo somatic structures and unifies them by means of the concept of live energy. Along with muscular armor, Boadella distinguished also two other types – visceral and cerebral armors.

Reich and his followers, like other adepts of the emotion theory, regarded body language as inner somatic process involved in formation of emotions. When focusing on his/her own body language, the person masters the instrument to relate with herself/himself (and not others) and helps to restore the body's spontaneity. Muscular tension hinders this spontaneity, forms negative emotions and distress, blocks other emotions. The language of the body, as a brake of person's mental life, is one more version of understanding of this concept. In general, Reich and his pupils' approach is quite significant since it brings positive therapeutic results.

Mentioning positive therapeutic results, it is worth also noting that role of physical exercises or massage in this process might be questioned, ascribing the positive results to therapist's efforts to prepare the patient for this therapy (note that all these schools concentrate on analysis). Therefore, the placebo effect could not be excluded in this case.

To test the placebo version, other body-oriented psychotherapies, where there is no focus on analysis, should be looked at. For example, in Rolfing (the system of Ida Paulina Rolf) psychological problems are not discussed and only posture and physical part of procedures are advanced. Analogical is the system developed by Austrian actor M. Alexander where physical exercises aim at body-mastering and coordination only (that is why they are popular among actors). Also, dance therapy works on movements only.

The progressive muscular relaxation (Edmund Jacobson) and autogenic training (Johannes Heinrich Schultz) – two well-known relaxation techniques work also without any specific psychological concept. In all these cases, patient are told that tension is something undesirable and that it should be removed or softened. Psychophysical procedures help patients to overcome muscular tensions. These methods are leading techniques in stress management process [J. Greenberg, 2002]. This is the evidence that physical procedures have therapeutic effect even without psychological interference. Therefore, there is no doubt that body language correction in these cases really helps to manage stress and, therefore, here the placebo effect could be overruled.

Based on this phenomenon, Reich and his followers have built theoretical constructs, not always sufficiently convincing. They consider that free movement of energy in body, not interfered by muscular spasm, is a sign of healthiness. This idea of psychobiological energy is closely related with Freud's concept of mental (physic) energy. Apart from this, the presented health model almost coincides with eastern views of body energy and Franz Anton Mesmer's magnetic fluid theory. However, until now all these theories have not been fully justified. Thus, energetic theories in psychology could not be viewed as scientific. The sense behind their origin might be that

any healthy person, unlike depressed patients, feel body energy. But this fact itself needs some explanation. In other words, energy theories try to explain body language peculiarities through something which needs explanation itself. Making conclusions on biological life energy on the basis of person's experiences turns to be the same *ad hoc* theory which further, if develops, may take shape of cosmogonic mythology (which really happened in Reich's case).

Literature on body language is really large in number and the format of this article does not allow us to continue overviewing it (for instance, we haven't touched upon interesting topics of animal body language, language of eastern asanas, psychosomatic disturbances body expressions). However, we believe that we reflected basic tendencies of body language research. The analysis has shown that there is no contradiction between conventional forms of body language and the theory that underlies their existence, however, in every other case, when psychological aspects step forward, theoretical problems arouse. In this regard, it is natural for representatives of the school of Psychology of Set to investigate whether this theory has any potential to solve the problems regarding theoretical issues of body language.

For better understanding of the concept and the theory of set, it is important to take into account Uznadze's experiments (1927) aimed at investigation of psychological nature of meaning of the object [D. Uznadze, 1956]. Within the frame of Wundt's structuralism, Uznadze studied the experiences which arouse in the process of understanding of objective meaning ("the meaning of the object"). The same frame was used by the Wurzburg School to research thinking processes. They concluded that in the process of perception of intellectual material (instruction, task, phrase, word) occurred some integral state (disposition) which was unconscious. Uznadze applied the Wurzburg School's method of systematic self-observation in his experiments but instead of words he used objects (for make the perception process slower, people participated in experiment with closed eyes). The result coincided with that of the Wurzburg School. The Set of Consciousness occurred in every case when a version related to the objective meaning arose.

In these experiments the set is mental equivalent of the meaning of object. Later when analyzing language issues, Uznadze wrote that verbal set was mental equivalent of [word] meaning [D. Uznadze, 1964]. From these two fragments, we can conclude that for Uznadze the set is mental equivalent of any meaning, semantics, thought...

It is reasonable to suppose that in his later works, when writing about the set, Uznadze implied the mental equivalent of meaning. When the set is considered to be the main determinator of behavior, it means that Uznadze derives behavior determination from its semantics (it is known that for

Uznadze the specifics of psychological behavior lies in its meaning – D. Uznadze, 1967), whereas the semantics of behavior results from the insight of relation between the meaning of the need and the meaning of the situation.

Later, under influence of K. Marbe, Uznadze defined the set as organism's psychophysical readiness for behavior. The readiness for behavior could not occur unless the semantics of behavior is determined. Thus, the version of „psychophysics readiness“ does not exclude but, on the contrary, implies the “semantic”. At the same time, the “semantic” model is more general than that of “readiness” and it broadens the concept of the set.

Also, it is worth emphasizing that body involved in behavior obeys the semantics of behavior. Under influence of semantics, body modification generate psychosomatic, set-like state external expression of which is body language. This model of Uznadze is common for all activities of all living beings, i.e. body language precedes and accompanies each and every activity. Thus, on the background of Uznadze's model, the theories of James-Lange, Cannon-Bard and Schachter do not look ad hoc hypothesis any more since for Uznadze not only emotion but any other state is unity of the mental (cognitive) and the “physical” which is reflected in body changes.

From this position it is easy to conclude that body tension and relaxation generate different forms of emotional feelings. Certain semantics corresponds to both states. Since tension arises when people are incapable in front of impending danger, the chronic tension of the body forms the set that these people are weak, that they need to get rid of this environment and be passive. With the same logic, calm body would generate feelings of strength, superiority over the environment and semantics, readiness (energy) for action, i.e. it would form the set, the set which determines person's physical and psychological well-being.

The last but not the least: in his theory, Uznadze emphasizes the important role of fixation elements (subjective meaning, repetition, sensor modalities) for the process of set formation. It is likely that paralinguistic components (which act at several sensory channels) play this very role of strengthening verbally conveyed content (to fix the set) in both listeners and speakers since the content is usually more differentially perceived when formed in multisensory manner.

Conclusion

Summing up the analysis of the body language theme, we are able to conclude on existence of theoretical problems associated with this subject of study. Testing the potential of the Psychology of Set in this context, we have an impression that Uznadze's conception could contribute to successful solution of these problems in understanding of body language.

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