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NON-VERBAL CUES IN POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF GESTURAL SIGNALS SENT BY AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN POLITICIANS

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ABSTRACT

"Speech is accompanied by an intricate set of gestural signals which affect meaning, emphasis and other aspects of utterances" Argyle (1972: 245). They are at least as influential as the verbal content of the message in determining how an individual is perceived (Rosenberg et al. 1986). Kopacz (2006) claims that non-verbal behaviours play an immense role in forming people's judgements and may be used in political persuasion to elicit positive reactions from voters. The objective of this paper is to analyze some of the most popular body signals sent by American and European politicians and show which of them are considered positive and strengthen the verbal message and which are said to be negative and make the performer look unprofessional and untrustworthy. The next purpose is to determine which non-verbal channel such as eyes, face, hands, posture, legs is the strongest and attracts the greatest attention.

KEYWORDS: political communication; non-verbal communication; steeple; American Four; mouth guard gesture.

1. Defining political communication

Political communication is a relatively young branch of communication studies as it appeared in the second half of the 20th century to replace a negative term "propaganda" (Dobek-Ostrowska and Wiszniowski 2002: 105; Prathanis and Aronson 2003: 17). It soon gained popularity and grasped the attention of sociologists, psychologists, linguists, politicians and businessmen (Dobek-Ostrowska and Wiszniowski 2002: 105). According to behaviourists, political communication is based on actions of public institutions which aim to promote those institutions and should concentrate on four areas: propaganda, electoral analyses, mass communication and the relationship between media and public opinion. Structural-functional approach defines political communication as "a process of communicative actions which influence the functioning of political sys-

tem" (Dobek-Ostrowska and Wiszniowski 2002: 108). Finally, interactionalists emphasise the importance of non-verbal clues and call politicians actors.

Today, it is impossible to perceive political communication as a separate branch that is unrelated to other forms of communication. Primary focus is placed on the tight connection between political and mass communication (Dobek-Ostrowska and Wiszniowski 2002: 122). It is argued that technological development has lead to the "media visibility" of politicians who create their image through the use of visual impressions that are communicated by appearances in newspapers, magazines, on television and, recently, in the Internet (Kid 2004: 21). Scholars also underline the link between political and non-verbal communication (Korolko 1998: 34f; Lewandowska-Tarasiuk 2005: 19). They pinpoint that successful and influential speeches must not only be rhetorically and aesthetically valuable but also the proper manner of delivery is strongly insisted on by the listeners (Bloch 1975: 4). It is argued that gestural signs are at least as influential as the verbal context of a message (Rosenberg et al. 1986) and people make judgements on the basis of what politicians say and how they discuss it (Turk 1999).

2. Non-verbal communication

By the term *non-verbal communication* we understand all communicative acts that are performed without words (Knapp and Hall 2000: 23). It is a universal system, through which we can express our feelings and emotions without even "opening the mouth", "it is a language that allows us to hear the words with our eyes" (Thiel 1997: 9ff). Gestural behaviours are an indispensable element of every communicative act as "our body cannot not communicate" (West and Turner 2004: 136). The following paper is organised around five channels of non-verbal communication: eye-contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture and dress. But non-verbal communication encompasses also paralanguage (vocal qualities of verbal messages), haptics (the use of touch) and proxemics (the use of space) (Kopacz 2006:8; Steward 2003: 122).

There are several universals "that provide a framework within which the specific of non-verbal communication may be viewed" (West and Turner 2004: 135). To begin with, messages sent through our body always occur in context, which means that a given situation determines the meaning of a given behaviour, e.g. a pounding fist on a table during a speech is something different from pounding the same fist in response to news of a friend's death (West and Turner 2004: 135). Next, non-verbal clues usually occur in packages of clusters (Mc Kay and Davids 2002: 59), "in which various verbal and non-verbal behaviours reinforce each other". For example, "we do not express fear with our eyes while the rest of our body relaxes" (West and Turner 2004: 136). Argyle (1972: 257) also pinpoints that when cues are contradictory the observer does not average them but opts for one and reinterprets the others. Furthermore, non-verbal communication is rule governed, "which means that it is regulated by a system of rules and norms that state what is and what is not appropriate, expected and permissible in spe-

cific social situation (West and Turner 2004: 136). Finally, bodily behaviours are culture specific and the meanings of gestures vary from region to region (Axtell 2001).

Scholars of political sciences perceive non-verbal communication as a means through which politicians can consciously exert influence on the listeners and convince them to support their foreign and domestic policies (Perloff 2002, as cited in Kopacz 2006: 6). Rosenberg's (1986) study offers a compelling support for the claim that it is possible to strategically manipulate some components of public speakers' non-verbal presentation to guide voters' perception. "Given a proper instruction a candidate can be trained to look and act in a way that projects the kind of personal image that is attractive" (Rosenberg 1986: 109). Argyle (1972) also notices that many aspects of personal appearance (e.g. hair, clothes) are under voluntary control and may be easily faked and exaggerated for persuasive purposes. Therefore, it should be highlighted that cues used by public speakers' can be deceptive and often lack their traditional, genuine character (cf. Steward 2003).

2.1. Eye-contact

Eyes are thought to be "the seat of the non-verbal system" (de Vito2003: 112; Lewis 1999: 136) and direct eye-contact is perceived as a signal of sincerity, honesty and confidence (Turk 1999: 177; Dale and Wolf 2000: 21). Public figures who look their interlocutors straight into the eyes are said to be more effective and persuasive (Kopacz 2006:11). Avoiding eye-contact, on the other hand, often manifests negative feelings and emotions. Dale and Wolf (2000: 21) mention that politicians who do not look at the public are considered anxious, embarrassed or ashamed.

2.2. Facial expressions

The first man who started professional research on mimics was Charles Darwin (1872), who observed that facial communication is a characteristic feature only of humans and primates (see also Argyle 1988: 40). Further studies in this field proved that face is the most important channel through which we can express our feelings, emotions and beliefs (Knapp and Hall 2000: 403; de Vito 2003: 110). Facial expressions are also among the most influential displays of political candidates because cameras focus extensively on the face, making it a salient source of information (Kopacz 2006: 8).

2.3. Hand gestures

Gestures performed by hands are the oldest form of non-verbal communication and date back to the times of Cave People (Eisler-Mertz 1999: 11). Their importance and "magical" symbolic have also been underlined by the Hindu who made their gods possess as many limbs as possible. As a result both Brahma and Wischnu have four arms. Today

hands are perceived to be the most "talkative" part of the body and are used to perform various functions e.g. express wishes, show feelings and symbolise moods (Thiel 1997: 53). Moreover, they can regulate the flow of information, underline and explain verbal messages and anticipate the forthcoming signals (Knapp and Hall 2000: 317).

There are many ways of classifying hand movements, however, the most basic is the division into speech unrelated and speech related gestures (Knapp and Hall 2000: 137). The former called emblems have a "direct verbal meaning" and can be translated into words and phrases (Ekman and Friesen 1977). The latter referred to as illustrators totally depend on the verbal message (Knapp and Hall 2000: 328). Fig. 1 shows examples of the most popular speech related gestures used by public speakers:

Fig. 1a. Fig. 1b. Fig. 1c. Fig. 1d.

Fig.1. Examples of some more popular hand movements as speech related gestures.
Fig. 1a. Palms moved upwards signalise lack of confidence.
Fig. 1b. Palms directed downwards show decisiveness.
Fig. 1c. Hands raised and directed toward the audience are a signal of assurance.
Fig. 1d. Hands directed towards the speaker express the will of taking control.

Figures 2 and 3 present other hand signals used by politicians.

Fig. 2. Steeple.

"Raised steeple" expresses confidence of the speaker and is considered to be very fashionable nowadays. It is most often used while politicians do the talking.

Fig. 3. Mouth guard gesture.

"Mouth guard gesture" is performed by the hands covering the mouth and the thumb being pressed against the cheek as if the brain was subconsciously instructing it to suppress the deceitful words that are being said. If the speaker performs this gesture, it means that he is hiding the truth, if the listeners use the sign it indicates that they do not trust the performer.

2.4. The language of legs

Leg gestures usually communicate defensiveness, aggressiveness and lack of confidence (Colin 2002: 106) and are referred to as "barriers" by many specialists (Thiel 1997: 83). However, Pease (2001) notices that the meaning of leg movements is culture specific and apart from negative feelings they can also express positive emotions. Below are some common ways of leg arrangements.

Fig. 4. Standard way of sitting.

The woman is sitting with her legs crossed at the knees. If combined with other negative non-verbal clues, e.g. folded arms, this gesture implies that the person is rather aggressive and has low opinion of her interlocutors.

However, in the European culture, women who sit with their legs crossed at knees are considered determined and self-confident.

Fig 5. The American Four.

The "American Four" form of sitting is combined with the gesture of clasped hands. A person who behaves like this is very self-confident and feels comfortable in the situation. He is aware of his strong points and considers himself to be a specialist in the given field. "He is a good person on a good place".

2.5. Posture

According to Argyle (1975), humans and animals express their attitude towards their interlocutors through posture. "The way we stand or sit determines our involvement in the discussion and gives away the level of our self-confidence" (Knapp and Hall 2000: 29). There are five universally accepted ways to radiate confidence: keeping the spine straight, rotating the shoulders back, keeping the head erect, standing on feet slightly apart, sitting straight and leaning forward (Dale and Wolf 2000: 19).

Figures 6 and 7 present the most popular sitting and standing positions.

The position in Fig. 6 means that the person is ready to work and take up an action. He is slightly leaning forward and his both hands are comfortably resting on the legs. One leg is moved backwards as if it was hidden under the chair whereas the second is visible and directed towards the listener.

Fig. 6. Sitting and leaning forward position.

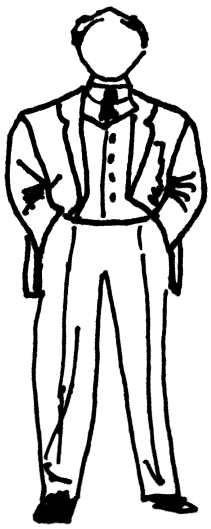

Fig. 7. The boss posture.

This position is called “the posture of the boss”. Hands are hidden in the pockets so they are not visible. Face does not express any emotions. The man seems to be very self-confident and aware of his social position. He knows that he is a leader.

2.6. Clothes

The last non-verbal clue that plays an important role during public performances is dress (Turk 1999: 127; Knapp and Hall 2000: 292). It appears that the proper choice of clothes does not only strengthen the credibility of verbal messages but also influences the assessment of the performer and informs about the speaker's status and viewpoints (Turk 1999: 173).

3. Method

3.1 Participants and procedures

The sample consisted of 50 participants (nine males, thirty seven females and four unidentified) who volunteered to answer the survey. All were citizens of Poland and the educational level was university graduate. Subjects ranged from 24 to 62 years of age, with an average age of 36. None of them received any training in public relations or non-verbal behaviours. From the interviews conducted before the experiment, it followed that none of the respondents belonged to a political party or had strong political preferences. Moreover, it appeared that many respondents were politically naïve to a great extent, as they, for instance, could not provide the names of Polish politicians or ascribe their political function. During the experiment, the subjects were clearly instructed to provide possibly objective answers without taking into account their previous knowledge, associations or personal attitudes.

The participants were asked to analyze a set of 6 photographs presenting American and European politicians (see Appendix 1) on the basis of a 7-question survey. Each photograph was firstly evaluated among several personality dimensions including competence, likeability and trustworthiness. Then the respondents were asked to interpret the meaning of gestural signals used by the politicians and were also supposed to explain why the public speakers looked professional/unprofessional.

3.2 Corpus description

The main reason for which the author decided to rely solely on pictures was the claim made by Rosenberg that "[if] given only a single photograph of a person, people will make reliable judgements on that person's character and fitness for public office" (Rosenberg at al. 1986: 1190). It was also assumed the in order to provide such a detailed analysis of non-verbal cues the respondents might prefer "stable" images that could be evaluated for a longer period of time. It is also worth mentioning that the choice of real politicians in authentic situations was not accidental. The author wanted to determine whether different presentations of the same well-known person may yield

different images of that person's character (therefore, two pictures presenting George Bush were chosen). Next, it was presupposed that the opportunity to judge celebrities and not anonymous people would motivate the subjects.

Five out of the six photographs used in the experiment (see Appendix) were selected from newspapers: Photographs 1 and 2 came from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Photograph 3 – from *Viva* (both printed in Poland), Photographs 4 and 5 – from *Newsweek* (European edition). Photograph 6 was downloaded from the official White House web page (for detailed information, see Appendix 1). Four photographs were taken during real communicative situations. Photograph 2 depicts Kazimierz Ujazdowski (Polish Minister of Cultural Heritage) during a press conference. Photograph 3 presents Condoleezza Rice (Secretary of State) preparing for a meeting or presentation. Photograph 4 portrays Gerhard Schröder (Chancellor of Germany from 1998 to 2005) taking part in a discussion or a debate. Photograph 6 shows two politicians: George Bush (the president of the USA) and Alan García (the president of Peru) participating in a press conference. The remaining illustrations are artificial, as the politicians posed for them. Photograph 1 presents Zbigniew Wassermann (chairman of the PKN Orlen Sejm investigation commission). Photograph 3 shows the key figures of the US government: George Bush (the President of the USA), Colin Powell (Secretary of State 2001–2005), Dick Cheney (Vice-President), Condoleezza Rice (current Secretary of State), Andrew Card (Secretary of Transportation), GeorgeTenet (Director of CIA from 1997 to 2004) and Donald Rumsfeld (Secretary of Defense).

Finally, it should be noticed that the author selected photographs that illustrated popular gestures that are frequently used by politicians: Photograph 1 – "American Four; Photograph 2 – "steeple"; Photograph 3 – "boss posture"; Photograph 4 – "mouth guard"; Photograph 5 – "standard sitting"; and Photograph 6 – "sitting and leaning forward posture".

3.3. Results

Table 1 summarizes the responses given to the first five questions of the survey. The results presented in percentages correspond to the number of positive answers given to the following questions: (1) Does the politician evoke positive feelings? (2) Does the politician look self-confident? (3) Does the politician look friendly? (4) Is the politician telling the truth? (5) Would you trust this person? The results indicate which photograph made the biggest impression on the respondents and which gesture positively influenced the image of the politician.

Table 2 summarizes the responses given to question 6: "What makes the politician look professional/ unprofessional?" It appeared that whenever an explanation was provided it referred to non-verbal channels. The results, expressed in percent correspond to a number of times a given channel was mentioned.

Table 1. Summary of results (Questions 1–5).

	Photo 1	Photo 2	Photo 3	Photo 4	Photo 5	Photo 6
1. Does the politician evoke positive feelings?	68%	50%	70%	32%	72%	72%
2. Does the politician look self-confident?	70%	50%	88%	48%	76%	80%
3. Does the politician look friendly?	66%	50%	78%	24%	42%	86%
4. Is the politician telling the truth?	34%	26%	60%	28%	72%	54%
5. Would you trust this person?	36%	30%	48%	26%	64%	46%

Table 2. Non-verbal channels.

	Photo 1	Photo 2	Photo 3	Photo 4	Photo 5	Photo 6
Eye-contact	0%	12%	0%	2%	2%	2%
Facial expression	12%	12%	0%	12%	4%	8%
Hand gestures	0%	10%	20%	12%	2%	4%
Language of legs	18%	–	0%	–	0%	6%
Posture	10%	8%	4%	–	6%	14%
Clothes	14%	10%	22%	18%	24%	12%

Table 3 summarizes the responses given to question 7: "What do you think the politician is thinking about?" and aims to define the direct meanings of the non-verbal signals sent by the politicians. In each case only three most popular answers are included and the results expressed in per cent correspond to a number of times a given definition was provided.

3.4. Discussion

From the data in Table 1 it can be concluded that certain non-verbal behaviors such as "American Four" (Photo 1), "boss's posture" (Photo 3) or "sitting and leaning forward posture" (Photo 6) reinforce the image of politicians and make them look confident. On the other hand, there are gestures e.g. "mouth guard" (Photo 4) which should be avoided as they decrease the value of public speaker's appearance. Those findings provide some support to claims made by scholars of non-verbal communication (cf. Pease 2001).

What seems to be more interesting is the evaluation of the "steeple" (Photograph 2). Theoretically, this gesture should strengthen the credibility of verbal message and make the politician look self-confident (Pease 2001). However, only 50% of respondents (which

Table 3: The meaning of gestures.

Gesture	Meaning
American Four (Photo 1)	– I'm marvelous 20% – I'm handsome 10% – I can prove they are lying 6%
Steeple (Photo 2)	– I don't want to speak 18% – I hope they will understand 8% – I'm bored 6%
Boss Posture (Photo 3)	– I know I'm right 20% – I'm listening 8% – Let's go for a drink after work 4%
Mouth Guard (Photo 4)	– You can't be telling the truth 8% – How to solve it 8% – I'm worried 6%
Standard Sitting (Photo 5)	– I'm worried 24% – What will I do after work 8% – What to do with the Iraq issue 6%
Sitting and leaning forward (Photo 6)	– Success 12% – We're friends 6% – I'm so handsome 4%

is a relatively small amount if compared to the 80% in the case of Photographs 3 or 6) considered Kazimierz Ujazdowski self-assured, and 74% stated that the man was lying. Moreover, the meanings of this gesture provided by the subjects (see Table 3) differ from those assigned by non-verbal scholars: "I know what I am taking about" (Pease 2001: 66). This discrepancy may lead to the conclusion that behaviors that are positively received in the USA and in Northern Europe do not necessarily have the same meaning in Poland.

Intriguing findings circulate also around the idea that a candidate's image can be shaped in such a way so as to manipulate people's preferences (Rosenberg 1986). Photographs 3 and 4 present George Bush. Although both pictures received similar results, certain discrepancies are still visible. The American President looked self-confident to 88% of the respondents in Photograph 3 but only for 80% in Photograph 5. Bush (Photograph 4) was considered friendly by 78% of the subjects and Bush (Photograph 5) was considered approachable by 86%. Those results indicate that different photographs of the same individual produce different images and bodily behaviors are prone to manipulation.

The first thing to be noticed after an analysis of Table 2 is that non-verbal channels (eyes, facial expressions, leg and hand gestures, posture, clothes) are indicators of po-

litical professionalism. It came as a surprise, but is seems that dress attracts the greatest attention. The subjects mentioned clothes while analyzing all the photos (even Photograph 4, where only a piece of a suit and tie were visible). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the respondents noticed details such as a carelessly tied tie (Photograph 1) or an unbuttoned jacket (Photograph 3).

The remaining non-verbal channels received relatively little attention. Only one respondent noticed that the politicians did not avoid eye-contact. (The exception is Kazimierz Ujazdowski, whose gaze was judged as a sign of insecurity by 12% of the subjects.) As far as facial expressions are concerned, the participants (12%) noticed that the politicians presented in Photograph 1 and Photograph 6 were smiling, and similarly, 12% of the respondents mentioned that Gerhard Schröder (Photograph 4) had a furrowed forehead, and that his face expressed deep concentration. Similarly, hand and leg movements (contrary to expectations) did not make great impression on the respondents. The participants often enumerated "proper posture" as an indicator of professionalism; this answer, however, remained unclear, as no further comment was added.

However, there are two figures that cannot remain unnoticed. Zbigniew Wassermann's leg arrangements (Photograph 1) attracted the attention of 18% of the respondents, and 20% of the subjects reported that George Bush (Photograph 3) kept his hands in his pockets. Both gestures are rare and unpopular in Poland, and in some social contexts they are even considered offensive. Nevertheless, both politicians evoked positive reactions and were reported friendly (see Table 1). This finding provides some support for the claim that non-verbal communication is rule-governed, and messages sent through our body always occur in context (West and Turner 2004).

Although, as it has been discussed before, non-verbal cues always appear in clusters and analyzing single gestures can be misleading, an attempt has been made to establish the direct meanings of the most popular body signals used by politicians. This task appeared to be rather demanding and only a small group of the respondents managed to provide any answer. Three positions evoked reactions which have been predicted by specialists of non-verbal communication. These were the "American Four" (Photograph 1), "Boss Posture" (Photograph 3) and "Mouth Guard" (Photograph 4). The first two were understood as a manifestation of confidence, whereas the last one was defined as a signal of distrust. Interpretations of the remaining postures differed from what has been established by scholars. For instance the "sitting and leaning forward position" is said to be speaker-oriented (Pease 2001), but the respondents regarded it to be listener-friendly ("I'm so handsome", "Success"). Also, "standard sitting" is believed to express confidence or even aggressiveness (Pease 2001), but not worry. This discrepancy leads to the conclusion that political gestures are culture specific.

4. Conclusions

The results of this investigation have provided some support for the claim that non-verbal behaviors do influence the way politicians are perceived. It has been shown that

"positive" gestures, such as "boss's posture", contribute to the image of public speakers and strengthen the verbal message, whereas negative behaviors, e.g. "mouth guard", spoil the impression and make the speakers look untrustworthy. Next, the study suggests that different photographs of the same individual may produce different images and the addition of even a small element can alter the way a person is perceived. The analysis of the results of the experiment also allowed to establish that political gestures are country-specific and do not have universal meanings. Finally, it appears that dress is the most persuasive non-verbal channel that decides about the politician's professionalism and these are the details such as a carelessly tied tie or an unbuttoned jacket that attract the biggest attention.

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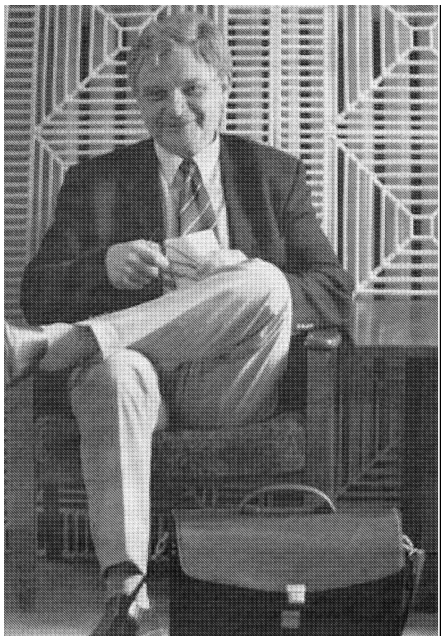
APPENDIX



Photograph 1. Zbigniew Wassermann. *Gazeta Wyborcza* (12–13 October 2005).

Photograph 2. Kazimierz Ujazdowski. *Gazeta Wyborcza* (18 November 2005).

Photograph 3. Colin Powell, Dick Cheney, George W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Andrew Card, George Tenet and Donald Rumsfeld. *Viva* (January 2005).

Photograph 4. Gerhard Schröder. *Newsweek* (06–13 June 2005: 3).

Photograph 5. Condoleezza Rice. *Newsweek* (11 June 2007: 32).

Photograph 6. George W. Bush and Alan García.
From: <http:// www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/04/images/20070423-1d-0185-2-515h.html>