

Non-verbal communication in political discourse: an analysis of non-verbal clues used by American and European politicians

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Non-verbal communication plays an immense role in the process of exchanging information. To begin with, Mahrebian (cited in Thiel 1997: 9 and Mc Kay and Davis 2002: 59) states that the total impact of a message is a function of a following formula:

$$\text{TOTAL IMPACT} = 7\% \text{ VERBAL} + 38\% \text{ VOCAL} + 55\% \text{ NON-VERBAL}$$

This equation clearly shows that more than 50% of information is sent via our behaviour, and not as it might be expected words and phrases (Boczek 1999: 25). Furthermore, our listeners judge us not on the basis of what we say but how we say it (Turk 1999: 166). Next, Steward (2003: 125) notices that gestures are perceived to be genuine and highly believable (West and Turner 2004: 138). And finally, Ekman (cited in Knapp and Hall 2000: 35) states that non-verbal clues grasp the attention of the audience and make greater impression on them. Therefore, it cannot be denied that body language is a very crucial element of public performances that can positively or negatively contribute to the image of every politician.

In my research the emphasis was put on analysing and characterising body signals sent by American and European politicians. The data was obtained from various newspapers and magazines, from which the author selected 25 photographs presenting politicians during various speech acts and situations. Next, the images were carefully characterised with putting special attention to eye-contact, facial expressions, gestures performed by hands, language of legs, body posture and clothes the people were wearing. Then, the photographs were shown in a random order to 70 adults (all citizens of Poland), who were asked to say whether the politicians presented in the photos evoked positive or negative feelings. They were also invited to interpret body signals used by the performers. Finally, their answers were compared with the characteristics provided by the author. It appeared that in most cases, politicians who used positive non-verbal clues made better impression on the subjects and were considered highly professional, trustworthy and persuasive. However, speakers who sent negative body signals were judged unsuccessful and weak.

In the presentation the author would like to discuss the results of the experiment and show which non-verbal clues are considered positive in the world of public performers and can therefore strengthen the verbal message and make the speech act more persuasive and attractive for the listeners. The next purpose is to present those body signals that have negative influence on listeners and can to a great extent spoil the image of a politician and make them look unprofessional.

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