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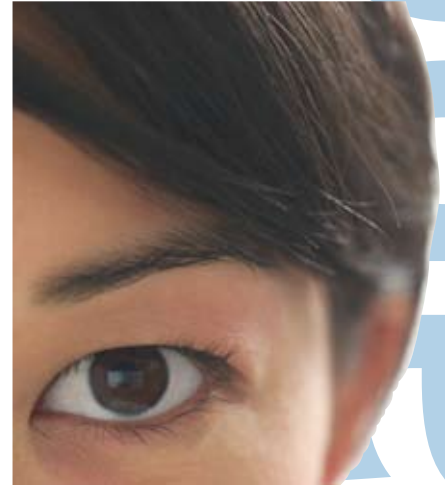
What Is Your
Body Language
Saying?

The Eyes Have It: What Body Language Is Saying

In today's competitive—and increasingly global—business culture, the value of effective and active communications seems obvious. Often times, however, so much thought is put into the verbal message that another key factor of successful communication can be overlooked: body language.

A “yes” with the pump of a fist. An “I care” with a hand on the heart. A “We’re pleased to be working with you,” with direct eye contact. Body language can help us become more likeable or a presentation more memorable, or it can solidify business opportunities. But, it can also make us look incompetent, ignorant or untrustworthy. That’s why it is imperative for you and your employees to be attuned to and aware of body language. In doing so, you will position your business to better communicate while recognizing, intuiting and interpreting the nonverbal cues of others.

This blue paper will begin by detailing the research on how to observe and decode body language, the emotions behind common uses of body language and the cultural and gender differences of body language. Following will be practical business “do’s and don’ts” that show how to use this body language information to put your best foot forward.



What to know before observing and interpreting body language

Joe Navarro, author of “What Every Body is Saying,” outlines ten points necessary to guide the interpretation of body language. As you read on, keep the following in mind¹:

1. **Observe your environment.** Navarro likens careful observation of body language to careful listening in a conversation. Both are equally important.
2. **Observe body language in context.** The better you understand when someone uses body language is just as important as how they use it—body language can be situational. For instance, a person who received bad news just prior to giving a presentation is likely to exhibit body language that they wouldn’t otherwise.
3. **Learn to recognize and decode uses of body language that are universal.** The more universal cues you can recognize and accurately interpret, the more sensitive you will be to all nonverbal cues and your interpretations will be more accurate.

¹ Navarro, Joe. *Every Body is Talking*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

4. **Learn to recognize body language that is common and unique to one individual.** Learn the quirks and ticks of your employees and business partners in order to best be able to use their overall body language as cues.
5. **Attempt to establish baselines.** Much like the previous point, if you are aware of the “normal” body language of a person, you will be better able to interpret their emotions. If someone usually uses their hands frequently when they speak, you’ll be alert to changes in emotion when they stop.
6. **Watch for body language clusters.** Accuracy of interpreting body language will be greatly increased when you monitor multiple uses. Don’t just look at someone’s eyes, look at their mouth, their gestures, etc. and note parallels and incongruent behavior.
7. **Look for sudden changes in behavior.** Sudden changes can indicate that someone is processing information or adapting or responding to a changing situation. This will allow for you to prepare for the subsequent changes in body language and recognize new thoughts.
8. **Learn to detect false or misleading signals.** It takes many hours of training to accomplish this, but only when you are aware of what a nonverbal cue does not mean, can you learn what it does.
9. **Know how to distinguish comfort and discomfort.** This will assist you in interpreting all other emotions.
10. **Be subtle.** People respond differently when they know they are being studied. Don’t throw off your interpretations by throwing off the person you are watching.

Common body language cues

Paul Ekman, renowned psychologist and scientific advisor to the Fox television series “Lie to Me,” believes that accurately interpreting the meanings of nonverbal communications can make [professionals] more effective leaders and managers. He adds that “If we are sensitive to the expressions of another person, then we know what impact we’re having on them and what emotion they might be trying to conceal.”² Often the nonverbal cues best able to illustrate such impact are those that come from facial expressions (the eyes and mouth), hand gestures, posture and proximity to others.



² Levinson, Meridith. “How to Be a Mind Reader: The Art of Deciphering Body Language -.” CIO.com - Business Technology Leadership. Web. 02 Sept. 2009. <http://www.cio.com/article/103250/How_to_Be_a_Mind_Reader_The_Art_of_Deciphering_Body_Language?page=1>.

Facial expressions

Facial expressions are often assumed to be the easiest aspect of body language to interpret and perhaps the best indicator of true emotion. In actuality, facial expressions can be the most misleading of nonverbal cues.

“We imagine our emotional expressions as unambiguous ways of communicating how we’re feeling,” says Jamin Halberstadt, researcher at the University of Otago in New Zealand. “But in real social interactions, facial expressions are blends of multiple emotions – they are open to interpretation.”³

Eyes

Everything from the direction of a gaze and the amount of time eye contact is maintained, to the imperceptible shift of an eyebrow can give someone away. Generally speaking, failure to make and maintain eye contact can be a sign of dishonesty, disinterest or nervousness. A raised eyebrow often illustrates interest or surprise and is seen as a submissive gesture while the raising of both eyebrows usually indicates surprise, horror or incredulousness. A sideways glance communicates interest, uncertainty or hostility while darting eyes indicate that someone is looking for an “escape route.”

Mouth

Like the eyes, expressions made with the mouth may seem easy to interpret at first glance, but can be deceiving. Consider smiles. People smile for a variety of reasons—not just to express happiness. Many people also smile when they feel fear or sadness or simply to reassure. Some people even smile to show aggression, mischievousness or calculation. Additionally, regardless of the true emotion or how genuine a smile may be, studies have shown that we subconsciously reciprocate them.⁴

Other nonverbal cues given by the face are:

- a furrowed forehead, which usually occurs when someone is anxious, sad, concentrating, or angry
- nostril flares, which often happen subconsciously when a person is aroused or taking breaths to prepare for an action
- blushing, which happens completely involuntarily to most people in situations of embarrassment or shame



³ “Believing Is Seeing.” *Newswise = Smart News Connection | Home*. Web. 03 Sept. 2009. <[http://www.newswise.com/articles/believing-is-seeing?page=1&search\[status\]=3&search\[sort\]=date+desc&search\[section\]=30&search\[has_multimedia\]=>](http://www.newswise.com/articles/believing-is-seeing?page=1&search[status]=3&search[sort]=date+desc&search[section]=30&search[has_multimedia]=>)

⁴ Pease, Alan and Barbara. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2006.

- blanching, which is more commonly referred to as going pale and is a sign of shock or guilt⁵

Often times, it's helpful to consider the expressions of the eyes together with the expressions of the mouth to most accurately interpret meaning. For example, Ekman explains that "One sign of a true smile is the muscle around the eye relaxing, causing the outer eyebrow to sag slightly. Sadness is also expressed around the eyes, but the mouth doesn't lift at the corners."⁶

Arguably, the most accurate way to decipher the true or hidden meanings behind facial expressions is through the examination of quick facial movements called "micro-expressions." Ekman describes micro-expressions as flickers of true emotion $\frac{1}{15}$ to $\frac{1}{20}$ of a second in length—almost imperceptible to the untrained eye—that "leak" when a person is attempting to express a disingenuous emotion.⁷ Because micro-expressions are so difficult to read, it can take years of training to accurately learn their meaning.

For the rest of us, and because of the varying meanings and interpretations of facial expressions, don't always accept expressions at face value (no pun intended). Use expressions as general indicators to guide conversation, look at other nonverbal cues to corroborate with expressions, and ask further questions to clarify and gauge the thoughts and feelings of others. Ekman also reminds us that "It's important to keep in mind that [facial expressions] do not reveal what is generating the emotion, only that an emotion is occurring."⁸

Posture

How someone holds him/herself—posture—contributes greatly to the overall message of body language and can convey a person's level of confidence, openness, attentiveness and comfort level. And, unlike facial expressions, posture is fairly evident upon first glance and is relatively easy to interpret.

A person who is standing straight with shoulders back, chest out and stomach in is someone who is open, exuding confidence and commanding attention. Alternately, a person who is standing with his/her shoulders slouched inward, with the head and neck down is someone who is either lacking confidence or interest or feeling inferior. Seated, someone who is sitting



⁵ Navarro, Joe. *Every Body is Talking*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

⁶ Wilson, Sarah. "Paul Ekman, the master of micro-expressions | Life and style | The Guardian." *The Guardian: Life and Style*. The Guardian. Web. 03 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk>>.

⁷ Ekman, Paul. "F.A.C.E. Training | About." *PaulEkman.com*. Web. 03 Sept. 2009. <<http://face.paulekman.com/aboutmett2.aspx>>.

⁸ Levinson, Meridith. "How to Be a Mind Reader: The Art of Deciphering Body Language -." *CIO.com - Business Technology Leadership*. Web. 02 Sept. 2009.

<http://www.cio.com/article/103250/How_to_Be_a_Mind_Reader_The_Art_of_Deciphering_Body_Language?page=1>.

upright with the legs crossed at the knees or the ankles with hands in the lap or on the arms of a chair is someone who looks comfortable and approachable while someone who is slouched back with their arms behind their head appears aloof, arrogant or apathetic.

When hoping to convey territorial dominance or superiority, we are apt to subconsciously puff out or up our chests. Alternately, a person who feels inferior, lacks confidence or is otherwise uncomfortable, will turn inwards, slowly inching their shoulders to their ears—much like the way a turtle retreats to its shell.

Gestures

There are more nerve connections between the hands and the brain than between any other parts of the body, and therefore the gestures and positions we take with our hands give powerful insights into our emotional state.⁹ Additionally, politicians and other public speakers incorporate the use of hand gestures into speeches for a reason—when used appropriately and consistently with the spoken message, they can place an effective emphasis on spoken words or serve as a memory device to listeners.



A study on this type of aided recall was conducted by the University of Manchester in England. It asked adult volunteers to listen to stories featuring a variety of characters and plotlines. For some listeners, a narrator added hand gestures such as moving the hands up and down quickly to show running, a waving movement to demonstrate a hair dryer and arms wide apart to show an opera singer. When the listeners were tested 10 minutes later, those who had seen the hand gestures had up to a third higher recall rate when remembering details of the storylines than those who did not.¹⁰

Like the narrators in these stories, many people emphasize important or key points with gestures, use their arms and hands to demonstrate size or mimic motions being described in conversation. These gestures are often very purposeful or natural, but like other forms of body language, gestures can often be carried out subconsciously, as well.

Here are some common gesture examples and their interpretations:

- When someone rubs his or her palms together in a quick motion, they are communicating positive expectancy.
- Rubbing the thumb against the index fingers or fingertips is widely used throughout North America when referring to money or cost.
- During negotiations, someone who is frustrated or fearful that they will lose the deal may clench their hands together.
- Arms that are crossed in front of the chest are a clue that a person does

⁹ Pease, Barbara, and Allan Pease. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. New York: Bantam, 2006. Print.

¹⁰ Pease, Barbara, and Allan Pease. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*. New York: Bantam, 2006. Print.

not agree with what is being said or crossed arms can hint at distrust, impatience or general unhappiness—as does arms on the hips.

- Comparatively, arms at the side that move freely with conversation or an outstretched hand making gentle contact with another person's elbow, are signs that a person is open, at ease with him or herself and friendly.
- An open, honest person is also naturally inclined to gesture with open hands—palms usually turned up, while motioning away from the body.
- When a person is lying or hoping to mislead someone, this person is more likely to use hand gestures less frequently than someone who is not being deceitful. If they do gesture, it's often in a defensive or passive manner—putting their hands in their pockets, clenching fists at their sides, or holding tightly onto an object.

Certain gestures can also let you know when a person is nervous or anxious—fiddling, touching the face or neck, playing with jewelry or rubbing their hands on their thighs. Many times people do these things as a way to self-soothe or distract from their feelings.

Bodily orientation and proximity

Bodily orientation refers to how our bodies move toward or away from a person as we speak with them while proximity refers to how close we stand to a person in conversation. There is some speculation that because feet are linked closely to the limbic system—the most primal area of the brain that triggers the “fight or flight” response—that they are the most honest of body parts, especially when someone feels inclined to exit a conversation or situation.¹¹

Feet are basically indicators of where someone wants to be—if you're talking with someone whose feet are pointed towards you or are holding steady at about a 45 degree angle, you know they are at ease with, or engaged in, your conversation. A sure sign that someone is disinterested or uncomfortable is if that person's feet are pointed towards the door or in the direction of someone else.¹²

Navarro shares a personal, yet quite common example of such behavior:

“Recently I was with a client who had spent almost five hours with me. As we were parting for the evening, we reflected on what we had covered that day,” writes Navarro. “Even though our conversation was very collegial, I noticed that my client was holding one leg at a right angle to his body, seemingly wanting to take off on its own. At that point I said, ‘You really do have to leave now, don't you?’ ‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘I am so sorry. I didn't

¹¹ Hoppe, Eliot. “Your Feet Say a Lot!” *Body Language Expert & Corporate Sales Training* :: Eliot Hoppe. Web. 6 Sept. 2009. <<http://eliotHoppe.com/articles/20080825-feet.html>>.

¹² Alexander, Shari. *Weblog post. The Strategic Communicator*. 5 Sept. 2009. Web. 6 Sept. 2009. <<http://presentingmatters.com/blog/>>.



want to be rude but I have to call London and I only have five minutes!’ Here was a case where my client’s language and most of his body revealed nothing by positive feelings. His feet, however, were the most honest communicators.”¹³

When someone is overly interested in you or not paying attention to your own body language, they may point their feet directly at you and move their bodies close to you. While a lean toward you would indicate interest or the need to hear better, the movement of one’s entire body within eight to 12 inches of another is often classified as an invasion of personal space. This closeness is seldom used in everyday situations (outside those of an intimate nature), and as such when experienced can be interpreted as social ignorance, flirtation or aggression and is cause for great anxiety in many people. The most common reaction is to back away from this invasion—a clue to you that you may be standing too close for comfort. Unless you intend to intimidate someone, don’t move with them—allow them their space instead. Studies have also suggested that when a person cannot back away from personal space invaders, or if the person they are speaking with does not correctly interpret the back away, they cope with their discomfort by decreasing the amount of eye contact. This coping mechanism is also cited as the explanation for the overall willingness to tolerate proximity in enclosed places like elevators.¹⁴



Lost in translation: Culture and gender differences and body language

Business often requires communication and interaction with people of differing cultures. Like body language within our own culture, body language in other cultures can have varying meanings and a wide range of interpretations. But, there is the added obstacle of cultural differences. Like spoken language, body language is not universal across cultures or sometimes even across genders. If the effort is not taken to understand these differences, communication can become difficult at best and offensive at worst. Jeanette Martin, Professor of Management at the University of Mississippi and author of numerous books on conducting global business, points out that regardless of whether or not your business conducts meetings or has communications internationally, you and your employees still need to be cognizant of cultural differences found in body language.

“The U.S. has a workforce that is global. People from every culture in the U.S. work and live here. While it is nice to be ethnocentric and say anyone who lives in the U.S. should learn to act like an American, that is simply not going to happen,” says Martin, “Managers must learn how to work with people from many different cultures successfully and part of that is learning the body language of the other person.”

¹³ Navarro, Joe. *Every Body is Talking*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

¹⁴ “Nonverbal Communications.” Blatner.com. Web. 9 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.blatner.com/adam/level2/inverb1.htm>>.

Martin adds that businesses that do wish to secure an international presence need to work extremely hard to understand other cultures or they will not succeed.

“Global business is here to stay,” she says, “How well companies engage in and are successful in global business depends on how much time they take to learn about other cultures, and how well they can use their cultural intelligence to develop win-win decisions for both parties.”

In their book “Global Business Etiquette,” Martin and Lillian Chaney point out that the smile, in particular, offers great opportunity to confuse in the cross cultural setting. In some cultures, smiling paired with a nod of the head is used in conversations simply as a means to acknowledge what another person has said—even if what was said wasn’t understood or was not agreed with. In Japan, smiles are used to convey almost every emotion and the Japanese are inclined to smile or laugh in attempts to conceal discomfort or embarrassment. Koreans interpret those who smile frequently as shallow, which doesn’t bode well for the people of Thailand who smile quite frequently and see it as a genuine and positive personal attribute.¹⁵

Eye contact in a global setting can be just as confusing. For example, people of China and Japan are apt to look just below the chin during conversation, avoiding direct eye contact, while Hungarians expect prolonged and direct eye contact.¹⁶

As far as posture is concerned, know that Asians and Middle Easterners consider the crossing of legs inappropriate and that in the Arab world it is considered downright offensive. Arabs believe that because feet are the lowest part of the body, they are unclean; crossing legs usually reveals the “unclean” underside of one’s foot, which is why it should be avoided.¹⁷



When language barriers are present, the natural response is to overcompensate with exaggerated use of gestures. That’s why gestures in the global setting can be land mines—understand that many gestures accepted in the U.S. have very different meanings elsewhere. For instance, the O.K. gesture in the U.S. is the French gesture for “worthless” and while the U.S. gesture of the thumbs down is negative, in Mexico it’s worse—it’s obscene. Also in the U.S., people tap the forehead to indicate thought ... but don’t do this in the Netherlands or you will have just called someone crazy.¹⁸

¹⁵ Martin, Jeanette S., and Lillian H. Chaney. *Global Business Etiquette A Guide to International Communication and Customs*. New York: Praeger, 2006. Print.

¹⁶ Morrison, Terri, and Wayne A. Conaway. *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries (Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60)*. New York: Adams Media Corporation, 2006. Print.

¹⁷ Morrison, Terri, and Wayne A. Conaway. *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60 Countries (Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands: The Bestselling Guide to Doing Business in More Than 60)*. New York: Adams Media Corporation, 2006. Print.

¹⁸ Martin, Jeanette S., and Lillian H. Chaney. *Global Business Etiquette A Guide to International Communication and Customs*. New York: Praeger, 2006. Print.

Another sensitive aspect of body language in the context of other cultures is proximity. The general rules of how far or close to stand to another person vary quite greatly from culture to culture. Japanese and people of Southeast Asian cultures tend to stand much further apart from the people with whom they are conversing than most people in the U.S. While in Italy, it is appropriate to stand extremely close (by American standards) to someone else and to back away is seen as insulting.¹⁹

Martin recommends finding a mentor within the culture you will be communicating with who will help you understand differences and nuances, or exploring the possibility of hiring an outside consultancy to assist you and your employees, even if those employees have previously travelled abroad.

“Even if people have already travelled globally, many times there are things they are seeing that they do not understand,” says Martin. “The world is a big place and there are many ways for living, and they are all correct.”²⁰

A general rule of thumb for anyone working with those from cultures different from their own—if you don’t know, ask.

“Ask questions when you see things that are different that you do not understand,” says Martin. “Learn to laugh at yourself when others do not understand your body language because it is different from theirs. Learn to explain your body language to others when you are aware through watching that something is misunderstood or not right.”²¹



In terms of gender, men and women often speak different dialects of body language, too. Studies have shown that²²:

- Women tend to gesture less than men.
- Women break eye contact sooner than men do.
- Women stand slightly closer to one another, face each other more, and touch more than men do with other men.
- Men tend to cross their arms or protect their torso less than women do.
- Men prefer side-by-side interaction, while women prefer face-to-face.
- Men send and interpret fewer facial expressions than women.
- Men naturally tend to have more relaxed or aloof postures.

¹⁹ Martin, Jeanette S., and Lillian H. Chaney. *Global Business Etiquette A Guide to International Communication and Customs*. New York: Praeger, 2006. Print.

²⁰ Jeanette, Martin. “Comments on Business and Body Language?” Message to the author. 17 Sept. 2009. E-mail.

²¹ Jeanette, Martin. “Comments on Business and Body Language?” Message to the author. 17 Sept. 2009. E-mail.

²² “Nonverbal gender differences can strain any relationship.” *A Life Coach for Women - Coaching women to be confident, connected, accomplished*. Web. 8 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.focused-momentum-lifecoach.com>>

Women and men should also be mindful of common misinterpretations of seemingly natural displays of body language when interacting with each other—head tilting, touching and laughter, when done excessively or aggressively, can all be received as flirtation.

Ten tips for putting your best face forward

Studying and interpreting the body language of others through the cues listed above will help you to become more aware of your own. Additionally, follow these ten tips to ensure efficient and accurate nonverbal communication.

1. **Practice makes perfect.** If you're preparing for a presentation or a speech, the most fail-safe preparation is to practice in front of a mirror or someone else. In doing so you will be able catch otherwise subconscious body language as it happens and prevent it from occurring during your actual presentation or speech.
2. **Balance eye contact.** Keith Ferrazzi, best-selling author of "Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time," recommends maintaining a good balance of eye contact by holding focus 80-90 percent of the time. Any more than that, he says, is leering while any less than that is likely to illustrate disinterest.²³
3. **Establish yourself.** Instead of entering a room "all smiles," which can make you look unprofessional and diminish credibility, establish a presence in a room first. Then, smile genuinely and naturally or not at all—a forced smile is transparent.
4. **Find your footing.** Plant your feet about six to eight inches apart with one slightly in front of the other and stand tall with your stomach in, chest out and shoulders back. Not only will this convey confidence and approachability, it can even create self-confidence by the sense of being rooted, grounded or balanced.²⁴
5. **Use your hands to extend your voice.** Like smiles, gestures are most effective when they occur organically. Motion with your palms up, use motions to demonstrate or elaborate what you are saying, don't point or touch your face or neck, and remember that excessive use of gestures can be distracting.
6. **Copy cat.** Many body language experts, like Ferrazzi, recommend mirroring the gestures of the person with whom you are speaking.



²³ Ferrazzi, Keith, and Tahl Raz. *Never Eat Alone And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time*. New York: Currency, 2005. Print.

²⁴ "Business Body Language: Handshakes, Eye Contact, Posture, and Smiles by Lillian D. Bjorseth: The Sideroad." *The Sideroad: Your Road to Expert Advice*. Published by Blue Boulder. Web. 2 Sept. 2009. <http://www.sideroad.com/Business_Etiquette/business-body-language.html>.

- “By adjusting your behavior to mirror the person you are talking to, he’ll automatically feel more comfortable,” says Ferrazzi. “It shows that you’re particularly sensitive to other people’s emotional temperament.”²⁵
7. **Engage in conversation.** Let others know that you are listening by nodding or tilting your head on occasion and make sure your feet are pointed towards them. Don’t cross your arms or put your hands on your hips, and if you’re wearing a watch don’t look at while you are talking to others.
 8. **Ask questions.** If someone you’re speaking with is expressing body language that is inconsistent with their verbal message, ask them to clarify. Be prepared for others to do the same to you.
 9. **Respect the bubble.** For most North Americans, a comfortable distance between people in casual and personal conversation is about 12 to 36 inches and four-and-a-half to five feet in professional conversation. Also be mindful that intimate, protective, aggressive or confidential conversations often take place in the “intimate zone”—the six-12 inch range.²⁶
 10. **Know that nothing is certain.** There are many analyses of body language and twice as many interpretations—these should be viewed as guides, not definitive translations. A person’s overall demeanor and the context of conversations can be more telling than a single gesture seen in isolation. And of course, accept that no matter what you do, someone, somewhere will be offended by your body language.

Body language is the extension of thought. It has been used for centuries—predating common language between cultures. It’s an important part of effective communication—both in getting your own message across and in determining the messages of others. Body language is how we know when someone is listening, it’s how we know someone likes us or finds us boring, it’s how we know someone is being honest or feeling an emotion, it’s how we know someone is reacting to what’s being said. Knowledge is power and the eyes have it—take the time and effort to become familiar with others’ exhibitions of body language, especially in the global context, and to become familiar with your own.



²⁵ Ferrazzi, Keith, and Tahl Raz. *Never Eat Alone And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time*. New York: Currency, 2005. Print.

²⁶ “Body Language.” *University of Northern Iowa College of Business Administration*. Web. 2 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.cba.uni.edu/buscomm/nonverbal/body%20Language.htm>>.