

Reaching Out: A Historical Overview of the Evolution of Non Verbal Communication

A Manisha

Department of Basic Science, Aryan Institute of Engineering & Technology, Bhubaneswar

Rashmi Sahoo

Department of Basic Science, Capital Engineering College, Bhubaneswar

ABSTRACT

Communication has always been associated with all living beings from the very beginning. It has its roots in the distant past where it grew steadily and imperceptibly, but the methods of communication have changed radically and in the present age are changing more rapidly from year to year. In order to understand how communication is like, it is not sufficient to know what the methods or ways of communication are in the present times. It is essential to be aware of how it came to be or what it is? Way back in time, feelings, emotions and messages etc. were conveyed through body language, sign language and many other nonverbal forms of communication. Therefore, this paper aims at addressing itself to the historical growth and development of the ways and means of non verbal communication ever since the inception.

KEYWORDS: non verbal communication, body language, cave paintings, fire signals, sounds.



“Communication - the human connection - is the key to personal and career success.”

The Need to Know the Past: In the past, communication grew steadily and imperceptibly, but the methods of communication have been changing from time to time and are still changing more rapidly from year to year. For the researchers, anthropologists and scientists, this is a matter of great concern that how communication worked before modern science, technology, mass media and written word, etc. came into existence. To understand the process, progress and development of communication, it is not enough for us to know what are the ways and methods of communication in the present age. We cannot ignore our past, which is always present with us and our lives are engrossed in it. We are not only its products, but all our thoughts and deeds are also formed by it. Aurobindo Ghose’s opinion that present is the only ‘pure and virgin moment’ cannot be fully accepted because a great deal of our present is determined, formed or shaped by our past, and we cannot ignore that the roots of our present and future lie in the past. As T.S.Eliot once wrote,

“Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time past, And time future contained in time past, All time is eternally present.”

(207)

Hence, for us, it is equally essential to be aware of how communication came to be and what it is? What was its form in the past and how it is changing its shape? For this, we have to investigate how communication originated in the distant past and how it came to its present state by gradual development over the period. Besides this, in order to draw full profit of modern communication technologies, we are supposed to

understand its historical narrative, growth and development in the primitive age.

How Human Beings Started Communicating:

Human beings made their first appearance on earth nearly two million years ago when the world was very young, and it heralded the dawn of an era, which was yet unborn, i.e. the era of communication. At that time, there was no language in which human communication could take place. Then the question arises, how come that communication of a sort did take place? It is a mystery because we have the interesting recorded history of human beings' those days when they appeared on the earth and began to record events in a written form. However, unfortunately we do not have records of prehistory when humans had lived on the earth for several hundred or thousand years before they learnt the art of writing or when they had no written records.

Until the last century, little was known about prehistoric times. However, the mysteries related to the people, their lifestyle and growth and development of communication in the prehistoric period were solved, to some extent, when archeologists began to dig up the places where prehistoric people lived. They found old tools, habitans, bones of humans and animals and their belongings. Through the information that scholars obtained from these mentioned things, they collected a fairly good record of not only how prehistoric humans lived and started sharing their information, but also the growth and development of communication. In order to understand the origin and development of methods of communication in the primitive age, we must look into the very origin of human life.

Use of Body Language:

In the very early stage of development of the human race, humans were called creeping animals. At this time, they evolved from tree apes and gradually learnt to stand on their foot and to walk. In the earliest stages, the human existence revolved around food gathering and hunting. Later, they learnt to hunt birds and animals to satisfy their hunger. At this stage, they started expressing their feelings of joy by clapping hands or by beating their chests or thighs with their hands. This practice of expressing feelings of joy by clapping hands still exists in our societies. According to Harry Edward Neal, "every day every human being uses some gesture or sign in his conversation with others, and this has become so natural that we are not conscious of the fact that we are harking back to the days when some people could understand others only by using no words at all only a sign language." (14)

Therefore, in order to externalize their feelings and needs, early people used their bodies to communicate. Body language and other nonverbal languages played a very vital role during the primitive age. Burn has rightly said, "The history of sign language is as old as mankind. The ability and the urge to express ourselves in gestures and movements of our limbs, to give emphasis to our feelings and thoughts, to our desires and aversions, are gifts with which man is born. They are an inheritance which goes back to his earliest stages in evolution." (Adler 32)

Gradually, when early men's brain increased in size and improved in quality, they learnt to join their fellow men because they understood the fact that in order to live, they needed to eat and to protect themselves from the weather and animals it was very essential for them to be in groups. Soon they started populating earth and expanded families coalesce into tribes and wherever they lived, they searched for food. Thus, they learnt what the right kind of food was and from where they could get it. They also found out which kinds of animals were dangerous and which were not. In addition they not only learnt how to protect themselves from dangerous animals, but also understood how to make tools, clothes and build shelters by using animal skins. A need to communicate these feelings was deeply felt, and this knowledge had to be passed on from one generation to the next so that the tribes could survive.

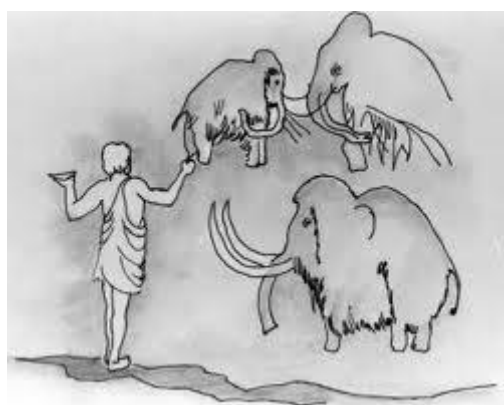
Although early humans used to manage understanding each other through symbols of sounds and gestures like grunts, screams, giggles, waving and talking hands, yet they were unable to make any permanent records of their ideas, day today happenings of importance or discoveries. The reason was that whatever gestures or noises they used to make were soon forgotten. This urge compelled them to establish "some recorded evidence of his accomplishment, some account that other people could see and understand without having to listen to his voice or watch his hands and face." (23) It is mentioned in many books that early men were cave dwellers, and their biggest worry was about enough food because at this stage, they did not know how to keep cattle and farm. The earliest of them were hunters. When they could not get enough food, they had to go hungry. Therefore, they started thinking of hunting large animals so that it would yield enough meat to last them for some time. H. E. Neal says that, "Somewhere along the dim historic line a primitive hunter slew a deer and decided to boast about his kill. He broke off part of the animal's horns and then, using a sharp piece of flint, scratched a crude picture of his kill into the antler fragment. To make his meaning clear he scratched the image of a spear, with the point at the animal's side." (24)



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At such stage, it is not very easy to draw a clear-cut picture about the methods of communication of ideas. But 'the prehistoric cave paintings are probably the oldest examples of human communication that have come down to us out of the past.' (Schramm 8)

Visual Communication through Cave Paintings: Several caves containing wall pictures have been discovered in India, France, Italy and Spain. In these caves, multi-colored drawings on ceilings and walls give an impression of almost 'picture galleries.' These paintings are of running bison, horses, bears, reindeers and mammoths with interesting hunting scenes. In many cave paintings, animals and human figures have also been found engraved on bones ivory.



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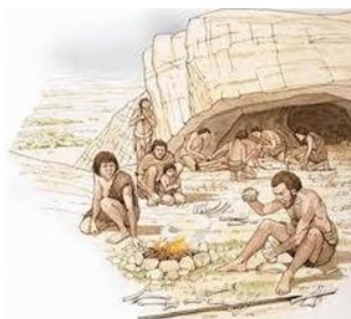
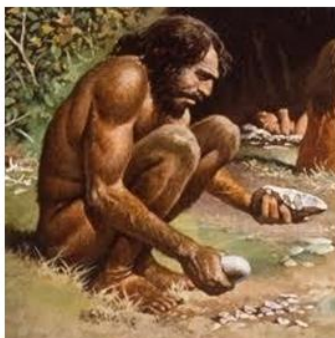
Some scholars share this opinion that these paintings had a magical purpose as many paintings are found in which animals are dying with spears or arrows sticking into them. This was what cave dwellers really used to wish to happen when they used to go for hunting. On the other hand, many scholars have this view that perhaps they used to draw animals for fun or to make a record of once they killed the animal that they used to see.

Whatever their purpose be behind painting these animals and other things, the important thing is that these cave paintings are probably the oldest examples of human communication that came down to us out of the past and these were the earliest known attempts by primitive humans to represent the world in which they used to live. Therefore, it is very clear that the art of painting owes its origin to the prehistoric humans as they were the first painters, and these cave paintings were a major form of visual communication at that time. These cave paintings were the beginning, which, later converted into picture messages. These picture messages used to be written either on barks or on the skins of wild animals. Even today, Chinese still use a form of picture writing. Therefore, we can say that this earliest system of visual communication was one of those ways in which cave dwellers harnessed their sense of sight, along with their ability to make patterns and images in order to convey their feelings, commands, facts, and explanations and so on.



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Use of Stones to Convey Messages: As time passed, early humans discovered the need for an order, as a result of which they found out how to control their supply of food, how to tame and keep animals and plants. Gradually, they learnt to use stones for sending messages during hunting. During their travels, they used to leave landmarks, such as the piles of stone or cuts on trees along with trails and hunting grounds to guide them on return trips. They also learnt to produce sounds by striking two pieces of stone against each other.

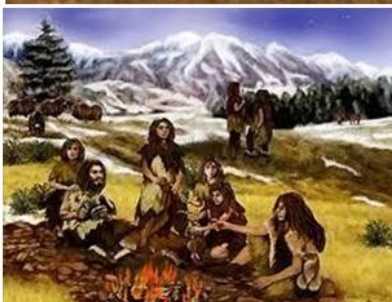


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Later on, they also invented tools for catching animals. This period “saw the first known appearance of high quality art. It marked the first age of technology; signified by the number of new tools. It was the time when humans had organized their own living groups and were beginning to use their unique cranial weapon, a high intelligence never before seen on the earth, to explore around them, undertake new tasks, and face new problems.” (Schramm 16)

Use of Fire for Communication:

It was about 20,000 B.C. when early humans developed the ability to control fire, which they started using as another way to send and receive messages to those people who were not close enough to communicate.



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They started using fire as a code and signal to send news quickly as fire could be seen up to a long way distance. Later on, bonfires were used to be built on top of hills so that it could be seen from many miles away. When tribes came into existence, they made their own fire language.



Another form of signal fire was shooting of burning arrows into the sky, which was also a faster signal for communication. In India, fire symbol had a central role to play from the beginning of Vedic period. As Dandekar quoted,

“Sacrifice became the symbol of the Vedic Aryan culture, and Agni came to be recognized as the symbol of sacrifice.” (370)

Fire signals were used only in night times, but in daylight, they could not be used. Therefore, in order to spread messages to distant places in daylight, smoke signals were used. For this, small bonfires were built on hills partly covered with leaves or wet grass so that more and more smoke could be produced. As time passed, each tribe invented its own smoke code as fire code.

Sounds: Another form of Communication: Among the five senses of human beings, i.e., touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight- the two most highly developed senses were hearing and sight. The abilities of these senses are to invent as well as to utter an enormous variety of sounds, which has led to the successful oral communication of many of the most complex ideas. Like other animals, early humans (when they used to live in groups) used calls and other sounds to communicate.

An anonymous scholar has rightly pointed out that the rotation and revolution of earth around its parental body and other stars of the universe are seen in a definite and regular cycle which we call time and rhythm in musical language. This cycle of time and rhythm is observed in all sorts of birds and animals on earth, water and sky. The manner of their movements and the activities of their lives are all rhythmical. Further, human beings are gifted with time and rhythm by nature which they express through their physical movements.

When early humans used to live in mountain caves, on the top of trees or in the cavities of trunks of huge trees, whenever they happened to see a piece of animal hide struck on the cavity of a tree, they used to strike it with heavy blows, which produced a resounding sound. Thus, they eventually discovered a new method of producing sound and it led them to invent instruments like tom-tom and drum.



Early humans also used to throw sounds by the hands holding them in a conical shape and later on bamboo took its place to blow air and produce sounds. When they had to send messages much faster than voices could travel, they started using something which was hollow inside. Fishermen used big conch shells to blow in order to send messages, whereas shepherds used horns to call their cattle together. They used to stand on the top of high stone towers in order to shout through megaphones, which were made of animal skins. These instruments proved to be more powerful and louder in spreading sound. They were used during battles to collect helpers and friends.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it can be said here that primitive humans started communication with simplest vocal and gestural signals rooted in their physical structure. Scientists assume that their early communication was similar to animal communication, i.e. they used to receive and exchange information through their senses. After some times, they also communicated with each other through gestures, postures and facial expressions and expressed a limited number of sounds, such as grunts and cries. . This paper has made very clear that our present forms of communication are rooted in the past. Wilber Schramm has rightly said that in early times, “Communication must have been tactile or visual, in some cases olfactory. It must have depended on body movements- posture, gesture, and facial expression, movements of hands and fingers and feet. It no doubt included signals not requiring words-like a fire on a hilltop- and monuments-such as a mound to indicate a burial site, a pile of stones to make a path. All non- verbal.” (33)

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