

Verbal and Nonverbal Signs in Communication: a Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract: This article explores the interplay between verbal and nonverbal signs in human communication within a semiotic framework. Verbal signs, represented by language units, and nonverbal signs, including gestures, facial expressions, body movements, and paralinguistic elements, are examined as integral components of meaning-making. The study highlights how verbal and nonverbal codes interact, complement, or contradict each other in different communicative contexts, shaping the overall interpretation of messages. Special attention is given to cultural variability in the use of nonverbal signs and the pragmatic functions they perform alongside verbal speech, such as reinforcing meaning, expressing emotions, or regulating interpersonal distance. The research draws on examples from everyday discourse, media communication, and intercultural interaction, emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive semiotic perspective for understanding communication as a multimodal phenomenon.

Keywords: verbal signs; nonverbal signs; semiotics; communication; gestures; pragmatics; multimodality; intercultural communication.

Introduction

Communication is a complex phenomenon that involves both verbal and nonverbal elements, functioning together to create meaning. Within semiotics, the science of signs, verbal and nonverbal codes are regarded as equally important in the process of communication (Eco, 1976). Verbal signs, expressed through linguistic units, operate on the basis of conventional rules of language, while nonverbal signs—such as gestures, facial expressions, posture, and prosodic features—carry meanings that are frequently culture-specific and context-dependent (Birdwhistell, 1970; Kendon, 2004).

Scholars emphasize that communication is inherently multimodal, as verbal and nonverbal signs interact to construct meaning. Research indicates that more than half of communicative meaning may be transmitted through nonverbal channels (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013). Nonverbal codes can reinforce the verbal message, contradict it, or create additional layers of interpretation (Argyle, 1988). For example, verbal agreement accompanied by negative body language generates ambiguity, which highlights the importance of analyzing communication as a unified semiotic process.

Nonverbal communication is also deeply influenced by cultural factors. Gestures, proxemics, and facial expressions are interpreted differently across cultures, sometimes even leading to misunderstandings in intercultural encounters (Hall, 1976). In this regard, the semiotic analysis of communication acquires special relevance in a globalized world, where cultural diversity increasingly shapes interactions.

The purpose of this study is to analyze verbal and nonverbal signs within a semiotic framework, focusing on their interaction, pragmatic functions, and cultural variability. The main objectives are: (1) to review theoretical approaches to verbal and nonverbal semiotics, (2) to identify the pragmatic roles of nonverbal codes in communication, and (3) to examine cultural differences in the interpretation of verbal and nonverbal signs.

By addressing these issues, the article contributes to the development of semiotic theory and provides practical implications for intercultural communication, translation studies, and media discourse analysis.

Methods and Materials

The study is based on a qualitative approach within the framework of semiotic and pragmatic analysis. The research material includes authentic texts from English and Kyrgyz corpora, covering literary works, media discourse, and everyday communication. This choice is justified by the fact that corpora provide representative data on the functioning of both verbal and nonverbal signs in natural contexts (Biber et al., 1998).

The method of corpus analysis is applied in order to identify the frequency and distribution of indefinite pronouns and related verbal markers of indeterminacy in English and Kyrgyz. Such an approach makes it possible to detect systematic patterns of usage that may not be visible through traditional descriptive methods (McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

The comparative method is employed to reveal similarities and differences between English and Kyrgyz systems of verbal and nonverbal signs. This method has been widely used in cross-linguistic studies since it allows the identification of both universal categories and culturally specific features (Haspelmath, 1997).

The semantic and pragmatic analysis is used to investigate the communicative functions of signs in context. This approach makes it possible to understand how verbal and nonverbal codes interact in real discourse and how they contribute to the pragmatic goals of speakers, such as expressing uncertainty, politeness, or avoidance of directness (Levinson, 1983; Mey, 2001).

The research also draws on elements of cognitive semiotics, which interpret signs as part of broader meaning-making processes in human cognition. This perspective highlights the role of cultural models in shaping the interpretation of both verbal and nonverbal communication (Wierzbicka, 1997; Kull, 2009).

The combination of corpus-based, comparative, semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive approaches ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis. It provides a comprehensive perspective on the functioning of verbal and nonverbal signs in English and Kyrgyz communication, emphasizing both universality and cultural specificity.

Results

The analysis of verbal and nonverbal signs in English and Kyrgyz communication demonstrated both universal and culture-specific tendencies. The study revealed four major findings:

1. Universality of sign categories

The analysis demonstrated that both English and Kyrgyz communication systems share a stable and universal set of sign categories that are consistently used to express indeterminacy, uncertainty, and communicative nuance. These categories include verbal signs, represented by lexical and grammatical units, and nonverbal signs, manifested through gestures, facial expressions, posture, and prosodic features.

Verbal signs carry the semantic core of communication. They provide explicit lexical meaning and are organized by grammatical rules. For example, indefinite pronouns such as *someone*, *something*, *anybody* in English and *кимдир*, *бир нерсе*, *эч ким* in Kyrgyz indicate the presence of an entity without specifying its identity. Similarly, modal constructions (*might*, *could*) or particles in Kyrgyz (*балким*, *мүмкүн*) mark semantic uncertainty. Such verbal devices represent the linguistic encoding of indeterminacy and correspond to the principle that language structures ambiguity at the lexical and grammatical levels (Haspelmath, 1997).

Nonverbal signs, on the other hand, fulfill pragmatic functions by reinforcing, modifying, or even contradicting verbal meaning. A statement such as *I'm fine* can be semantically positive in verbal terms, but when accompanied by a hesitant tone or avoidance of eye contact, it communicates doubt or irony. In Kyrgyz, the utterance *жакшы* (“good”) may convey dissatisfaction if paired with a dismissive hand wave. This multimodal layering illustrates that communication cannot be reduced to verbal code alone but requires integration of both sign systems (Kendon, 2004; Argyle, 1988).

The stability of these categories across different languages confirms the universal multimodal nature of communication. Previous studies argue that meaning is rarely produced by words alone, as nonverbal codes consistently co-occur with speech to create coherent messages (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013). Our findings reinforce this claim by showing that English and Kyrgyz, despite typological and cultural differences, rely on the same dual structure of verbal-semantic encoding and nonverbal-pragmatic modulation.

This universality suggests that semiotic categories of verbal and nonverbal communication are not language-specific but rather cognitive and cultural constants. They reflect fundamental human strategies for dealing with uncertainty and for shaping interpersonal interaction through both explicit and implicit means (Eco, 1976; Wierzbicka, 1997).

2. Frequency of nonverbal signs

The corpus analysis revealed that nonverbal signs are not supplementary but rather frequent and systematic components of communication. They almost invariably accompany verbal utterances and significantly contribute to the interpretation of meaning. This observation supports the view that human interaction is inherently multimodal, with speech and body language forming an integrated system rather than two separate channels (Birdwhistell, 1970; Kendon, 2004).

In Kyrgyz dialogues, hesitation markers such as э-э or мм are commonly paired with specific nonverbal actions. For instance, speakers often avoid direct eye contact or tilt the head slightly downward while producing these fillers. Such combinations indicate not only hesitation but also respect or an attempt to soften the interruption of silence, which is pragmatically important in Kyrgyz cultural norms. The nonverbal reinforcement here transforms a simple hesitation sound into a culturally nuanced sign of indirectness.

In English conversations, hesitation is frequently realized through prosodic elongation, such as the drawn-out vowel in weeeell... or uhhh.... These markers are typically accompanied by upward intonation, slight eyebrow raising, or hand gestures that delay turn-taking. The corpus data show that hesitation in English is less about signaling deference, as in Kyrgyz, and more about gaining time to plan speech or manage discourse flow (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2013).

The high frequency of these multimodal clusters suggests that hesitation is rarely expressed by verbal means alone. Rather, it emerges as a synchronization of verbal fillers and nonverbal behaviors, which jointly signal uncertainty, reflection, or turn-holding. This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that prosodic and kinesic cues are essential for interpreting the pragmatic functions of speech (Goodwin, 1981; Argyle, 1988).

From a cross-cultural perspective, the analysis indicates that while the function of hesitation is universal—to manage time, signal uncertainty, or negotiate interaction—the forms of its nonverbal realization differ. In Kyrgyz, gaze avoidance and downward head movement are prominent, reflecting cultural patterns of respect and indirectness. In English, eyebrow movements and hand gestures dominate, highlighting individual expressiveness and discourse management.

Overall, the frequency and regularity of nonverbal signs in hesitation contexts demonstrate that they are indispensable for achieving communicative coherence. Their consistent co-occurrence with verbal fillers confirms that hesitation should be studied as a multimodal phenomenon rather than a purely linguistic feature (Kendon, 2004; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002).

3. Pragmatic functions

The findings of this study confirm that nonverbal signs are not merely supplementary to verbal language but fulfill crucial pragmatic functions that shape the interpretation of communicative acts. Among these functions, three are particularly salient: emphasis, politeness, and mitigation of directness. These results align with observations in pragmatic theory, which stresses the role of multimodal resources in achieving communicative goals (Levinson, 1983; Argyle, 1988).

Nonverbal cues often serve to highlight or reinforce verbal meaning. In English, a statement such as I really mean it may be accompanied by a firm hand gesture or a stronger intonation contour. Similarly, in Kyrgyz, the phrase чын эле (“really”) is typically reinforced by head nodding or by a

gesture of placing the hand on the chest, symbolizing sincerity. These examples demonstrate that emphasis is not only linguistic but also embodied, and its force depends on the combination of verbal and nonverbal elements (Kendon, 2004).

Nonverbal signs also function as markers of politeness. In English communication, smiling, maintaining appropriate eye contact, and adopting an open posture often accompany polite requests or apologies. For instance, *Could you help me, please?* uttered with a smile and a soft tone reinforces the intention of respect. In contrast, in Kyrgyz communication, politeness is frequently expressed through avoidance of direct eye contact in hierarchical contexts, lowered intonation, and gestures of modesty such as bowing the head slightly. These strategies reflect different cultural models of politeness: the English system prioritizes positive politeness (expressing friendliness and solidarity), whereas the Kyrgyz system emphasizes negative politeness (avoiding imposition and showing deference) (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hall, 1976).

One of the most significant pragmatic roles of nonverbal cues is the softening of directness in speech. In English, hedging expressions like *maybe* or *perhaps* are often supported by gestures such as a head tilt or shrug, which visually indicate uncertainty. In Kyrgyz, silence itself can serve as a mitigating strategy, signaling disagreement or refusal without explicit verbal confrontation. A simple utterance *балким* (“maybe”) accompanied by gaze avoidance functions as a culturally acceptable form of softening refusal. Such practices illustrate how multimodality enables speakers to balance clarity with politeness, especially in potentially face-threatening acts (Goffman, 1967).

While the pragmatic functions are universal, their realizations differ across languages and cultures. English relies heavily on nonverbal reinforcement of positive politeness, aiming to maintain harmonious and cooperative interaction. Kyrgyz communication places stronger emphasis on indirectness and avoidance strategies, which serve to protect social hierarchy and prevent overt confrontation. These differences confirm that pragmatic interpretation of nonverbal signs is deeply rooted in cultural values and communicative traditions (Wierzbicka, 1997).

In sum, the results show that nonverbal signs play an indispensable role in pragmatics by emphasizing meaning, signaling politeness, and mitigating directness. They function as culturally embedded semiotic tools that guide interpretation, shape interpersonal relations, and maintain communicative balance.

4. Cultural variability

The analysis revealed that nonverbal signs demonstrate significant variability across cultures, even when their surface forms appear similar. Gestures, body language, and facial expressions are strongly influenced by cultural conventions, which determine whether a given sign is interpreted as positive, neutral, or negative. This confirms the argument that nonverbal communication cannot be universally decoded without considering the cultural frame in which it occurs (Hall, 1976; Matsumoto, 2006).

In English-speaking contexts, direct eye contact is generally associated with attentiveness, honesty, and confidence. For example, during professional interactions in the United States or the United Kingdom, steady eye contact is expected as a marker of credibility. In contrast, in Kyrgyz culture, direct eye contact in hierarchical situations may be interpreted as a sign of arrogance or disrespect, especially when directed toward elders or authority figures. Instead, looking slightly downward conveys humility and respect, which aligns with broader Central Asian communicative traditions (Wierzbicka, 1997).

Hand gestures also vary in their meaning. The gesture of showing the thumb up is a widely recognized sign of approval in English-speaking contexts. However, in some parts of Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan, the same gesture may not carry identical positive connotations and can sometimes be seen as inappropriate in formal communication. Similarly, nodding typically signals agreement in English, whereas in Kyrgyz interaction it may serve as a backchannel marker (*ооба, угуп жатам* – “yes, I’m listening”), without implying full agreement.

English communication often permits closer physical distance in informal conversations, reflecting cultural values of openness and sociability (Hall, 1966). In Kyrgyz culture, greater interpersonal distance is usually maintained in formal contexts, and physical proximity is reserved for close family and friends. This variation highlights the semiotic role of space in shaping social relationships.

Silence is another culturally variable sign. In English contexts, prolonged silence may be perceived as awkwardness or communicative breakdown. In Kyrgyz culture, however, silence often functions as a meaningful communicative strategy, signaling respect, agreement without elaboration, or indirect disagreement. This demonstrates that silence itself operates as a culturally specific nonverbal code (Nakane, 2007).

These examples illustrate that even seemingly universal nonverbal behaviors acquire different meanings depending on cultural norms. The same sign may be interpreted as positive in one context and negative in another. This variability confirms the necessity of intercultural semiotic analysis to prevent misinterpretation and miscommunication in multilingual and multicultural settings (Scollon & Scollon, 2012).

Table 1. Verbal and Nonverbal Signs in English and Kyrgyz Communication:

Category	English Example	Kyrgyz Example	Function
Verbal – Indefinite	<i>someone said it</i>	<i>кимдир айтты</i>	Uncertainty, vagueness
Verbal + Nonverbal	<i>I don't know... + shrug</i>	<i>билбейм... + eyebrow raise</i>	Politeness, mitigation
Prosodic Nonverbal	Rising intonation (<i>really?</i>)	Elongated vowel <i>эээ...</i>	Hesitation, indirectness
Gesture Nonverbal	Direct eye contact	Downward gaze	Respect, hierarchy management
Mixed Multimodal	<i>maybe... + head tilt</i>	<i>балким... + hand wave</i>	Expressing uncertainty

The data confirm that verbal and nonverbal signs form a unified semiotic system in communication. While universality is observed in the basic categories of signs, cultural specificity strongly influences their pragmatic interpretation. These findings align with previous cross-linguistic research (Eco, 1976; Wierzbicka, 1997; Kendon, 2004) and provide new insights into Kyrgyz–English comparative semiotics.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the multimodal nature of communication, confirming that verbal and nonverbal signs function as complementary and interdependent semiotic systems. This finding corresponds with earlier semiotic theories emphasizing that meaning emerges from the interaction of different codes rather than from language alone (Eco, 1976; Kendon, 2004). The integration of verbal and nonverbal channels thus appears to be a universal characteristic of human communication.

One of the central observations is the universality of sign categories. Both English and Kyrgyz employ verbal markers such as indefinite pronouns and modal constructions to express uncertainty, while simultaneously relying on nonverbal cues such as hesitation markers, gestures, and prosodic features. This supports Haspelmath's (1997) cross-linguistic typology of indefiniteness and extends it by demonstrating that indeterminacy is multimodally encoded. The parallel functioning of these categories in structurally different languages—an analytic language like English and an agglutinative language like Kyrgyz—indicates that multimodality is grounded in cognitive and communicative universals (Wierzbicka, 1997).

At the same time, the study revealed significant cultural variation. In English, nonverbal signs are frequently employed to enhance politeness and to mitigate directness, which aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of positive politeness strategies. In Kyrgyz, however, nonverbal cues such as silence, gaze avoidance, or modest gestures often reflect indirectness and deference, which correspond to negative politeness strategies in hierarchical societies (Hall, 1976; Scollon & Scollon, 2012). This contrast demonstrates that while pragmatic functions of nonverbal signs are universal, their realization is culture-specific.

The findings also shed light on the role of silence. In Anglo-American contexts, silence may be perceived as communicative breakdown, whereas in Kyrgyz interaction it is a meaningful strategy of politeness or indirect refusal. This observation resonates with Nakane's (2007) analysis of silence in intercultural communication and underscores the need to interpret nonverbal cues through the lens of cultural norms.

From a methodological perspective, the use of corpus data and multimodal analysis proved effective for identifying systematic patterns that traditional linguistic approaches often overlook. Combining corpus linguistics with pragmatic and semiotic frameworks provides a more holistic understanding of communication. Future studies could further develop this line of research by expanding corpus data, including audiovisual material, and applying experimental methods to test how speakers of different cultures perceive and interpret nonverbal signs.

Overall, the discussion confirms that communication is inherently multimodal and culturally embedded. While universals ensure that verbal and nonverbal signs fulfill comparable functions across languages, cultural variability shapes the way these functions are realized and interpreted. Therefore, semiotic analysis of communication contributes not only to linguistic theory but also to practical fields such as translation studies, intercultural communication, and education.

Conclusion

The present study has examined verbal and nonverbal signs within a semiotic framework, focusing on their universality and cultural variability in English and Kyrgyz communication. The analysis demonstrated that verbal signs provide the semantic foundation of utterances through lexical and grammatical means, while nonverbal signs perform essential pragmatic functions by reinforcing, modifying, or even contradicting verbal meaning. This confirms that communication is inherently multimodal and that meaning cannot be fully understood without considering both channels.

The findings revealed several important results. First, universality is evident in the existence of stable sign categories such as person, object, quantity, and location, which are expressed in both languages. Second, nonverbal signs such as gestures, facial expressions, prosody, and silence occur with high frequency and systematically accompany verbal expressions, thereby shaping interpretation. Third, nonverbal cues fulfill key pragmatic functions including emphasis, politeness, and mitigation of directness. Finally, significant cultural variability was observed: English communication tends to rely on nonverbal cues for positive politeness and mitigation, while Kyrgyz communication emphasizes indirectness, respect, and hierarchical deference through gaze avoidance, silence, and culturally specific gestures.

These findings contribute to the broader field of semiotics by illustrating how verbal and nonverbal signs operate as a unified communicative system across languages. They also demonstrate the importance of intercultural semiotic analysis in preventing misinterpretation, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

Future research should extend this analysis by incorporating larger multimodal corpora, experimental methods for testing perception of nonverbal signs, and comparative studies involving additional languages and cultures. Such investigations will further clarify the balance between universal semiotic principles and culture-specific communicative practices.

In sum, this study highlights the central role of multimodality in communication and underscores the need to integrate both verbal and nonverbal perspectives in linguistic, cultural, and intercultural research.

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