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Taste: Why Gen-Y Johnny Can't Read Nonverbal Cues

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In September 2008, when Nielsen Mobile announced that teenagers with cellphones each sent and received, on average, 1,742 text messages a month, the number sounded high, but just a few months later Nielsen raised the tally to 2,272. A year earlier, the National School Boards Association estimated that middle- and high-school students devoted an average of nine hours to social networking each week. Add email, blogging, IM, tweets and other digital customs and you realize what kind of hurried, 24/7 communications system young people experience today.

Unfortunately, nearly all of their communication tools involve the exchange of written words alone. At least phones, cellular and otherwise, allow the transmission of tone of voice, pauses and the like. But even these clues are absent in the text-dependent world. Users insert smiley-faces into emails, but they don't see each others' actual faces. They read comments on Facebook, but they don't "read" each others' posture, hand gestures, eye movements, shifts in personal space and other nonverbal -- and expressive -- behaviors.

Back in 1959, anthropologist Edward T. Hall labeled these expressive human attributes "the Silent Language." Hall passed away last month in Santa Fe at age 95, but his writings on nonverbal communication deserve continued attention. He argued that body language, facial expressions and stock mannerisms function "in juxtaposition to words," imparting feelings, attitudes, reactions and judgments in a different register.

This is why, Hall explained, U.S. diplomats could enter a foreign country fully competent in the native language and yet still flounder from one miscommunication to another, having failed to decode the manners, gestures and subtle protocols that go along with words. And how could they, for the "silent language" is acquired through acculturation, not schooling. Not only is it unspoken; it is largely unconscious. The meanings that pass through it remain implicit, more felt than understood.

They are, however, operative. Much of our social and workplace lives runs on them. For Hall, breakdowns in nonverbal communication took place most damagingly in cross-cultural circumstances -- for instance, federal workers dealing with Navajo Indians and misconstruing their basic conceptions of time. Within cultures, Hall assumed, people more or less "spoke" the same silent language.

They may no longer, thanks to the avalanche of all-verbal communication. In Silicon Valley itself, as the Los Angeles Times reported last year, some companies have installed the "topless" meeting -- in which not only laptops but iPhones and other tools are banned -- to combat a new problem: "continuous partial attention." With a device close by, attendees at workplace meetings simply cannot keep their focus on the speaker. It's too easy to check email, stock quotes and Facebook. While a quick log-on may seem, to the user, a harmless break, others in the room receive it as a silent dismissal. It announces: "I'm not interested." So the tools must now remain at the door.

Older employees might well accept such a ban, but younger ones might not understand it. Reading a text message in the middle of a conversation isn't a lapse to them -- it's what you do. It has, they assume, no nonverbal meaning to anyone else.

It does, of course, but how would they know it? We live in a culture where young people -- outfitted with iPhone and laptop and devoting hours every evening from age 10 onward to messaging of one kind and another -- are ever less likely to develop the "silent fluency" that comes from face-to-face interaction. It is a skill that we all must learn, in actual social settings, from people (often older) who are adept in the idiom. As text-centered messaging increases, such occasions diminish. The digital natives improve their adroitness at the keyboard, but when it comes to their capacity to "read" the behavior of others, they are all thumbs.

Nobody knows the extent of the problem. It is too early to assess the effect of digital habits, and the tools change so quickly that research can't keep up with them. By the time investigators design a study, secure funding, collect results and publish them, the technology has changed and the study is outdated.

Still, we might reasonably pose questions about silent-language acquisition in a digital environment. Lots of folks grumble about the diffidence, self-absorption and general uncommunicativeness of Generation Y. The next time they face a twenty-something who doesn't look them in the eye, who slouches and sighs for no apparent reason, who seems distracted and unaware of the rising frustration of the other people in the room, and who turns aside to answer a text message with glee and facility, they shouldn't think, "What a rude kid." Instead, they should show a little compassion and, perhaps, seize on a teachable moment. "Ah," they might think instead, "another texter who doesn't realize that he is communicating, right now, with every glance and movement -- and that we're reading him all too well."

Mr. Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University, is the author of "The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future."

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