

# 93% of All Communication Is Nonverbal?

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*Correcting a Common Misconception of the Mehrabian Studies*

*BY HENDRIK WAHLER (2012)*

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### Introduction

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*93% of all communication is nonverbal, only 7% of what we communicate to others comes as verbally spoken language.* – You might have heard this one. It's in the media, on the internet and a very common prayer of self-called communication coaches. Apart from being highly counterintuitive, this claim is based on a simple misconception of two very famous studies by psychologist Albert Mehrabian. The objective of this paper is to correct this widespread misunderstanding and to comprehensively reveal to a lay audience what can—and what must not—be concluded from his findings.

### Plausibility Considerations

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Communication is conceived to comprise *verbal language* (spoken word, propositional content), *tonality* (paralinguistics: tone, pitch, loudness of voice), and *body language* (gestures, facial expressions)—the latter two are commonly referred to as *nonverbal communication*.

If it were true for all situations that 93% of all communication is nonverbal, we could, ideally, understand 93% of the message only by focusing on the nonverbal dimension. In consequence, then, we would not have much trouble finding out what happened today watching Japanese primetime news. But that is obviously not the case. If it were, there would be no use in learning Greek before spending a year there abroad—because we would already understand 93% of what is presented to us anyway.

Moreover, it becomes very clear that there cannot be a single universal percentage-rule of communication when we take different contexts into account: having sex with our boy- or girlfriend, meeting for lunch with a

friend, watching television, listening to the news on the radio, reading a medical journal. While the percentage of nonverbal communication during sex might increase to almost 100%, it plummets when we get to reading a clinically written journal. Psychological theories have to account for these phenomena (or reveal that—and explain why—we might be mistaken). What we can expect from psychological research is to give us a typology of different situations and to link each type to a corresponding ratio of spoken words, tonality and body language. And that is what Mehrabian’s study *is*: an empirical analysis of a specific and very limited type of situation, and we must not generalize these findings due to the following reasons.

### The Two Mehrabian Studies

The findings of the Mehrabian studies (Mehrabian/Ferris 1967, Mehrabian/Wiener 1967) are based on very abstract and artificially induced conditions of communication. Without going into further detail, let us look at one experiment in which the subjects were confronted with a neutral word (“maybe”) from an audio tape. The word was presented to them in either a positive, neutral, or negative tonality, with the result that the subjects were more likely to react to the voice’s tonality than to the spoken word. We must not generalize these findings for some simple reasons. First, one cannot simply transfer findings from artificially simplified situations to real life, for it is far more complex (Lapakko 1997: 64). Second, all of the subjects were “female University of California undergraduates” (Mehrabian/Ferris 1967: 249). In other words, the subjects shared certain preconditions—at least to a certain extend: sex, cultural background, age, language and so on. We cannot conclude that these findings are also true for old Malaysian farmers, maybe not even for male psychology students of the same university. It *might* be

true, but we cannot know as long as we do not have evidence that these factors are irrelevant. Third, even if there had been some variety regarding sex, age, cultural background and the like, the total number of remaining participants is 37—too low for the result to be significant. Fourth, there has never been a single study examining all three aspects of communication (verbal language, tonality, body language/facial expression). Rather, the rule—7% verbal, 38% vocal, 55% facial—is based on two different studies that cannot thoughtlessly be combined this way (Lapakko 1997: 64). It was also complained that the study is methodically prejudiced against verbal language: “...if people are given virtually no verbal cues, they will find virtually no verbal meaning.” (Lappako 1997: 64) And lastly, let alone the reasons so far, the studies are concerned with the question of sympathy, not information transfer: Only because we might be inclined to *like* someone more on the basis of nonverbal than verbal communication, that does not necessarily mean that we receive communicated *information* by the same ratio. Ironically, that is what Mehrabian himself pointed out very clearly. Maybe sometimes we should be more aware of *verbal* language—it might have prevented this common misconception from spreading like a disease.

## So what is the solution?

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What, then, is the right ratio of verbal language, tonality and body language in communication? That is hard to say and it is even in question if these things can be quantified at all. Nevertheless, Mehrabian quantified the components approximately in his famous 7%-38%-55%-rule (Mehrabian 1981: 76)—but we have seen its very limited range.

Besides that, many other findings indicate that a 7% proportion of verbal language might be far too low (Lappako 1997: 65). This claim can be

supported by the above plausibility arguments and our personal experience. In my view, it is not very important for a communicator to know the exact numbers—we just have to develop a practical knowledge of the important factors in different types of situations. Eventually, it's all about congruence: Even in situations like having sex, which are of highly nonverbal character, shouting out the name of your ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend will virtually always make a 100% difference—regardless of tonality and facial expression.

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