

D5 Interpreting body language

Table D.5 Interpreting body language

	Possible observations
■ Face/head	Be realistic about what you can deduce from facial expressions: they give a clue as to <i>what</i> people are thinking or feeling. It is very difficult to interpret a facial expression. Different people see different things. Facial expressions combined with different body posture can have different meanings. Listeners appreciate it most when the presenter appears relaxed and smiles occasionally (not all the time) as an indication that the presenter enjoys lecturing or giving the interview, wants to enter into a discussion and understands the topic.
■ Eyes	If the presenter or respondent does not manage to establish eye contact with you, this might indicate that he/she does not really want/dare to communicate with you. The presenter could be very nervous due to a lack of experience, and/or he/she may not fully understand the topic. People that do not look you in the eye might also just be shy. People that are lying tend to look upwards – for a moment. The function of eye contact, however, really differs per culture. In some cultures it is not considered polite to have direct eye contact. In this case people look down (and certainly not up).
■ Voice	There need not be a direct relationship between voice and personality or contents. But, when speakers raise or lower their voice or put question marks in their wording, you could assume that this is done intentionally. The voice, in this case, is intended to support and reinforce the message. Statements that end with a higher tone (question mark) suggest that the person is not very sure of the topic or the argument.
■ Hands	Standing or sitting with folded arms, hands held tightly, or in the pockets, in principle always creates distance from the audience. It can be a sign of disdain, of insecurity, or both. A presenter who places his/her hands in front of the mouth shows insecurity. This may also be true for 'big gestures'.
■ Feet	If the presenter crosses his/her feet or moves them regularly in an uncoordinated manner, this signals insecurity.
■ Clothing	Clothing and accessories provide the most information about the impression that people want to make. It shows part of their personality, but not necessarily the most important part (☹B13). Be careful with your inferences.
■ Posture	Guirdham (1990) points out that body movements indicate how <i>strongly</i> people feel something. Presenters who pace anxiously in front of the audience are not thought to be very convincing. But presenters who rarely move, with blocked shoulders, have to add a variety of facial expressions and hand movements. Otherwise they show that they do not really want to 'reach' the audience.