



# **DEBUNKING THE BODY LANGUAGE MYTH**

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I'm sure you've heard speakers and trainers say it, or perhaps read it somewhere—the claim that body language forms the greater part of any message. The speaker or writer then usually gives those famous percentages: words account for 7 per cent of the meaning of a message; tone of voice accounts for 38 per cent; and body language 55 per cent. The audience accepts it at face value, assumes that it applies to all communication, and everybody moves on.

The trouble is that it's not true.

Let's think it through for a moment. How much information could you really communicate just with body language and tone of voice? Could you order a pizza? Get directions? Communicate the body language theory itself along with the percentages? What about a lecture on particle physics? It's doubtful.

Have you ever tried to watch a movie on a plane without headphones? How much could you follow? If you believe the 7-38-55 myth, you should be able to follow 93 per cent. Ditto for foreign language films.

Go to a foreign country and order a meal without using words. If words convey only 7 per cent of your meaning, you should get exactly what you ordered.

In fact, you should be able to go to any country where they speak another language and understand 93 per cent of what the locals are saying. There wouldn't be any need to learn a foreign language at all, or use interpreters or language dictionaries.

How come we can have conversations in the dark—where there is no opportunity to use non-verbals?

Do we only catch 7 per cent of meaning when we're listening to the radio?

It's apparent that the notion that words are only 7 percent of a message does not apply to all communication generally. Without words we can certainly tune into feelings and attitudes, but we need words to really understand.

It all goes back to the work of Professor Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at UCLA. In his research, explained in his books *Silent Messages*, originally published in 1971, and *Silent Communications* (1972), Professor Mehrabian focused on some very specific areas of communication.

Professor Mehrabian based his 7-38-55 rule on two 1967 studies<sup>i</sup> that dealt with the communication of positive or negative emotions via single spoken words, like 'maybe', 'dear' or 'terrible'. He was trying to understand the mechanism of feelings of like and dislike.

One study compared the relative importance of words and tone of voice, and found that tone of voice had more influence on meaning. The second study compared the relative importance of facial expressions and tone of voice. Mehrabian then combined the two sets of data to obtain the ratio of 7:38:55.

Total liking = 7% verbal liking + 38% vocal liking + 55% facial liking.

He did not intend the ‘rule’ to apply across the board to all communication. It only applies when feelings and attitudes are involved, in particular when body language and tone of voice might contradict the words. When we receive conflicting messages, we tend to believe the non-verbals.

Mehrabian says on his website [www.kaaj.com/psych](http://www.kaaj.com/psych)

Please note that this and other equations regarding relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable.<sup>ii</sup>

Why is the 7-38-55 myth so readily accepted and disseminated? Its appeal might be because it turns accepted notions on their head and devalues the power of words. Or because it gives us false comfort that we don’t have to bother so much with words. It has become an urban myth, mindlessly repeated without any thought as to its veracity. Like all urban myths, we want to be true.

But it isn’t.

Trainers who continue to spread the body language myth are doing a disservice to their audience and to the scientist who conducted the original research.

Mehrabian’s model is a useful contribution, but, as he says, has limited application, and applies only when talking about feelings or attitudes.

Here’s what we can say:

- Words are only part of a message, but they are a vital part. We also communicate through body language and tone of voice.
- Non-verbals support the words by conveying the speaker’s feelings.
- When speaking about feelings and attitudes, and there is a mismatch between the words and the body language, we tend to put more trust in the non-verbals.
- If we have only words, as in emails, it is possible to misunderstand the emotion behind the words.

Creativity Works, a UK company, have created a short animated video called *Debunking the Mehrabian Myth*<sup>iii</sup>, that explains it succinctly. Go to [www.creativityworks.net](http://www.creativityworks.net)

So next time you hear a communication expert tell you that words are only 7 percent of the message, be aware that they haven’t done their research. Point them in the right direction.

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<sup>i</sup> Mehrabian, Albert; Wiener, Morton (1967). "Decoding of Inconsistent Communications". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6 (1): 109–114.

Mehrabian, Albert; Ferris, Susan R. (1967). "Inference of Attitudes from Nonverbal Communication in Two Channels". *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 31 (3): 248–252.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.kaaj.com/psych/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.creativityworks.net/busting-the-mehrabian-myth/>