

Metaphoric gestures



We add some 'reality' to this 'abstract' area of non-verbal communication

We have written before about the strong impact of an effective metaphor in a presentation or pitch. The skilful inclusion of a comparison that helps your audience understand one thing by understanding something else can add clarity, memorability and, ultimately, persuasion. Some of the best metaphorical expressions we have heard from our clients or from public speakers stay with us for years afterwards.

However, along with being able to use metaphors in speech, a truly accomplished communicator will also understand how to use metaphoric gestures for maximum impact.

Before exploring the idea of gestures in more detail, let's remind ourselves of an important point about metaphor: that is, rather than merely being elements of language, we actually *think* in metaphor and, consequently, metaphorical expressions are generated by these conceptual frameworks¹. A conceptual metaphor is a comparison that uses a (often more concrete) *Source Domain* to help us understand an (often more abstract) *Target Domain*.

Our brains 'map' the necessary elements from the *Source Domain* onto the *Target Domain* to add clarity and comprehension. We find this in business discourse. For instance, the conceptual metaphor SOCIAL ORGANISATIONS ARE PLANTS gives us metaphorical expressions such as 'He works for the local *branch* of the bank', 'Our company is *growing*' or even 'Employers *reaped* enormous benefits'².

The common conceptual metaphor MORE IS UP gives us metaphorical expressions such as 'share prices are

falling', 'house prices are *on the up*' or 'inflation continues *to soar*', all of which, of course, are simply comparisons.

The fact that we think in metaphor is key to appreciating why metaphoric gesture can also be impactful. We at GPB are adamant that gestures are essential to effective communication. (Indeed, some academics believe that gestures are so integral to communication that they should be classed as a part of speech rather than thought of as a separate category of non-verbal communication)³. There is plenty of debate about how best to categorise gestures, but we classify them into 4 types: **Iconic**, **Prosodic**, **Deictic**, and **Metaphoric**.

Iconic gestures are those that represent literally (or, as literally as possible) what a speaker is saying; **Prosodic** gestures are the beats on the stresses of the verbal utterance, used often for emphasis; **Deictic** are pointing gestures, for example at ourselves or a screen.

Metaphoric gestures are '*voluntary movements of the body which use a cross-domain mapping to express certain thoughts or feelings*'⁴. Metaphoric gestures, therefore, operate in a similar way to metaphors in language, relying on mapping across the source and target domains to aid understanding.

The potential for metaphoric gestures becomes obvious once you realise how much of a presentation or pitch (probably a significant majority) deals with abstract ideas, especially those related to the future which is, by its nature, unclear.

For instance, a phrase like 'My team have the experience to take your business to the next level' may well be



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Metaphoric gestures (cont.)

accompanied by a speaker raising their hand or hands to near eye level, with the palm/s down, to demonstrate this. ‘

‘We would then move to the next stage of implementation’ may be accompanied by a speaker moving both their hands, with palms towards their own chest, away from their body into the space in front of them, before pausing and holding them there, to show movement from one point to another on a timeline. This is metaphorical: the future is not ‘in front’ of us literally.

‘The market opportunities are endless’ may be accompanied by a speaker extending a hand and index finger in front of them and moving the finger in a circular motion three or four times, to show an endless cycle. ‘Let’s unpack this in more detail’ may be accompanied by a speaker ‘holding’ an invisible container between their hands out in front of them, and then moving their hands apart, turning palms upwards, as if opening and revealing what is being held inside the container (this is a well-known variation of the Conduit metaphor).⁵

We can’t easily show pictures of metaphorical gestures, as they all require movement, but spelt out with the descriptions above, you can see how these metaphoric gestures work:

The first example compares the complex and uncertain idea of growing the revenue, staff, geographic coverage and market share of entire organisation with the simple and embodied gesture of raising a hand from one position to a higher position; the final example compares the world of ideas being discussed at that moment with a physical, hand-held container being opened and its contents shared out physically with those in the room.

By incorporating strategic metaphoric gestures such as these, you can help to solidify the images you are verbalising, thereby adding clarity and greater understanding to the vision you are projecting to your audience in your presentation or pitch.

David McNeill tells us that, ‘An implication of the phenomenon of metaphoric gestures (of any kind) is that the abstractness of an idea is no barrier to its receiving reality in gesture form’⁶.

With all the uncertainty in the world today, adding a bit of ‘reality’ to the ‘abstract’ sounds like a positive thing to incorporate in all of our spoken communication, whether that be in a business setting, or indeed anywhere.

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References:

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3. David McNeill, ‘So You Think Gestures are Nonverbal?’, *Psychological Review*, 92:3 (1985) 350–371.
4. Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller, ‘Metaphor, Gesture and Thought’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Metaphor and Thought* ed. Raymond W. Gibbs Jr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp. 483–501, p. 487.
5. David McNeill, *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal About Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 147
6. Ibid., pp. 162–63.

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