

# THE 7% , 38% , 55% MYTH

Dr. C. E. "Buzz" Johnson

In the remote sense that anyone in the NLP field needs their memories refreshed concerning the numbers in the above title, let me briefly give my recollection from numerous sessions. The total message one receives in any face to face communication is divided into three components. The words themselves, the tonality used in delivering those words, and the body language accompanying the other two.

The numbers indicate the relative weight or importance assigned to each of these three areas with body language receiving the 55% figure, tonality the 38%, and the actual words themselves being tagged with a paltry 7%. This strangely skewed distribution has bothered me ever since my introduction into this marvelous arena called NLP.

## Out of the Mist

The first reason for my puzzlement was that none of my NLP instructors could tell me where those figures came from. Please do not interpret this to mean that I had been cursed with unknown and unknowing fly-by-night mentors. They are all very well known and active in the NLP community. They are also, in my opinion, excellent teachers. However, when asked where I might find further information about the research that produced those numbers, I was vaguely referred to a variety of well known universities. I later drew a blank at each of these institutions.

Secondly, if these percentages are really valid it would mean that the learning of foreign languages could be greatly abbreviated. After all, if the words only account for 7% of the meaning of communication, we should all be able to go to any country in the world, and simply by listening to the tone and carefully observing the body language, be able to accurately interpret 93% of their communications! And I'll bet you always thought that learning Chinese or Russian would be a real stretch. In fact, from these percentages, it appears that you needn't even bother. You may be better off without being encumbered by all the intricacies of any language. People like Leo Buscaglia are looking forward to the time when words will no longer be necessary as he states in his book *Living, Loving & Learning*. Since a word such as "love" has as many definitions as it has definers, he feels it will be a happy day when the world of word hang-ups is replaced by "vibrations."

## Counting on What?

I wonder how many of you have a 93% rate of accuracy when it comes to interpreting and understanding even your most intimate friends and family members? And that's with people speaking the same official language with its 7% impact!

It is not only the NLP community that is espousing and apparently believing the 7\_38\_55 myth. I've heard therapists and counselors who were unfamiliar with NLP allude to those same numbers. There also seems to be a widespread believe among the general population that words are relatively unimportant. I'm sure most of us have heard people mid-read with statements such as, "She didn't really mean what she said, she probably meant XXX instead." Or, "He may have said that but he didn't really mean it." Or, "It's not what you say, but how you say it."

In NLP change work, note how carefully we re-word statements in order to reframe a client's personal perceptions. And by very skillfully using just the right hypnotic language patterns, we are able to rapidly enhance desired shifts in our clients' understandings and attitudes and beliefs. Would we need to be this meticulous and conscientious if we were really dealing with only 7% of a person's awareness and comprehension?

I was finally able to track down the source of this myth thanks to a professional speaker who makes his living giving sales seminars and workshops. And yes, the 7-38-55 was an important part of his presentations. He didn't know how to spell the name of the individual

responsible for the research that originated those numbers or which university was involved, but he gave me a valuable starting point by offering me a couple of different possible pronunciations. I think you'll be interested in what I found.

## The Study

Albert Mehrabrian, Ph.D. Of UCLA was the originator of the 7-38-55 theory. He speaks of it in two books, *Silent Messages* published in 1971, and *Nonverbal Communications* published in 1972. In these two books, he refers to research projects which were published in various professional journals. I will get to the journals in more detail later, but first let's look at some of his statements from one of the books.

From Chapter 3 of *Silent Messages* we find that the numbers 7-38-55 expressed as percentages have to do only with what he calls the resolution of inconsistent messages, or to put it in NLP terms, incongruencies. He also states that there are very few things that can be communicated non-verbally. He initially was investigating liking/ disliking which he later generalized into feelings. In speaking with him by phone in March, 1994, he stated that his findings and inferences were not meant to be applied to normal communications. They were of very limited application.

Let me paraphrase some of his thoughts from page 134 toward the end of that book. Clearly, it is not always possible to substitute actions for words and therefore, what are the limitations of actions as instruments of communication? If you've ever played charades, you know that words and language are by far the most effective way of expressing complex and abstract ideas. The ideas contained in *Silent Messages*, and most other books for that matter, couldn't be done with actions. A very important thing to remember about the differences between words and actions is that actions only permit the expression of a limited set of things; namely, primary feelings and attitudes.

## The Details

Now let's examine in more detail the specifics of a couple of his experiments from which some people have made some rather sweeping and inaccurate generalizations. From the *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 1967, Vol. 31. No. 3, pg. 248-252 is a report entitled *Inference Of Attitudes From Nonverbal Communication In Two Channels*. This study was designed to investigate the decoding of inconsistent and consistent communications of attitude in facial and vocal channels. The experimental team found that the facial component received approximately 3/2 the weight received by the vocal component. You can readily see that this roughly corresponds to the 38% and 55% figures mentioned earlier.

You may be wondering how this study was conducted. There was only one word used. That word was "maybe," selected for its apparent neutrality. Three female speakers were tape recorded saying that word while varying their tone of voice so as to communicate three different attitudes (i.e., like, neutral, and dislike) towards an imagined addressee. Then the tapes were listened to by 17 female subjects with instructions to imagine that the speaker is saying this word to another person and judged by the tones what the speaker's attitude is towards that imaginary addressee. So there was no direct feedback by anyone who was being addressed. It was a number of third-party listeners who were asked to mind-read, guess, interpret, imagine, etc., how the speaker felt towards someone who wasn't even there and, in fact, didn't even exist. There was no way to see or hear the reactions of this phantom individual, about whom someone was going to make several long-lasting and powerful speculations.

Next, black and white photographs were taken of three female models as they attempted to use facial expressions to communicate like, neutrality, and dislike towards another person. Then photos were shown to the same 17 subjects with the instructions that they would be shown the pictures and at the same time hear a recording of the word "maybe" spoken in different tones of voice. "You are to imagine that the person you see and hear (A) is looking at and talking to another person (B)." For each presentation they were to indicate on a rating scale what they thought A's attitude was toward B. Again, third-party mind-reading

with no direct contact with the person addressed, B, because that person was non-existent. The conclusions from this experiment were that the facial components were stronger than the vocal by the ratio of 3/2 as referred to earlier.

An interesting comment that came out of the discussion section indicated that the effect of redundancy (i.e., consistent attitude communication in two or more channels) is to intensify the attitude communicated in any one of the component channels. Perhaps this is something that could be more profitably pursued instead of the denigration of words. Or as you can see from this particular study, word, not words. And that word was "maybe." It seems to play words under quite a handicap not much different from playing charades.

## Two Studied Combined

They integrated this study with another one to come up with the .07, .38, and .55 coefficients. This second study was reported in the *Journal of personality and Social Psychology*, 1967, Vol. 6, No. 1, pg. 109-114 entitled, *Decoding Of Inconsistent Communications*. Here they dealt with inconsistent communication of attitude in two components; tone of voice and nine different words. Three words were selected that seemed to indicate a positive attitude, "honey," "thanks," and "dear." Three were neutral, "maybe," "really," and "oh," and three were negative, "don't," "brute," and "terrible."

Two female speakers were employed to read each of the nine words with each of the three tones, positive, neutral, or disliking of an imaginary addressee. These were recorded on tape which was then listened to by 30 University of California undergraduates.

They were instructed to imagine that each word was being said by one person to another and to judge what the speaker's attitude was towards the imaginary recipient. One-third were told to ignore the information conveyed by the meaning of the words and to pay attention only to the tone. Another third were told to ignore the tone and pay attitude only to the meaning of the words. The last third were told to utilize both the tone and the content.

The findings were that the independent effects of tone, overall, were stronger than the independent effects of content. I should think so! After all, the words allowed were very limited while the tones allowed were unlimited as long as certain feelings were being demonstrated. But, after all, Mehrabian's main interest is in non-verbal types of communication. However, in fairness, it was mentioned in the discussion that the methodology used failed to solve the problem for which it was intended. An alternative methodology could have employed written communication for assessing the independent effects of content and electronically filtered speech (with the content rendered incomprehensible) for assessing the independent effects of tone. I don't know if an alternative experiment like that was ever carried out.

After commenting on some of the methodological problems, they do go on to say that the results indicate that judgments of attitude from inconsistent messages involving single words spoken with intonation are primarily based on the attitude carried in the tonal component. The use of single words is a long way away from normal communications, don't you think? In fact, they admit that their findings can only be safely extended to situations in which no additional information about the communicator-addressee relationship is available. This seems to relegate it to the realm of tightly controlled laboratory-pure experimentation only.

I would invite all of you readers to examine not only Mehrabian's books, but also his articles in the professional journals which go into more detail concerning his experiments. If enough of us carefully analyze the available data, perhaps we can reinterpret the results in a more useful, meaningful, and workable way than we have in the past.

## Time For Accuracy

If we continue to disseminate erroneous information such as the 7-38-55 myth, I feel we are doing a grave disservice not only to the NLP community, but to the public in general. We could do a great service by helping the public realize that the words they use on themselves as well as on others are extremely important in determining the effectiveness and longevity of relationships, the strength of personal self-esteem, and a whole host of other psychological physiological phenomena.

Words and language are probably the primary motivation factors for human beings and they can be enhanced by proper congruent tonality and body language. They can also be somewhat diminished by incongruencies which then often show up as confusion and bewilderment in relationship situations. For example, think how often some battered women have desperately believed the words of their batterers despite overwhelming incongruent behavior. "He said he was really going to change this time."

Think of your own personal experiences in close relationships that have gone sour. Haven't you also hoped and waited for change that would transform incongruent communication signals into congruent ones? Especially before NLP training? Haven't most of us, at some time, hopelessly clung to our own inaccurate interpretation of another's actions hoping for a miracle that would once again make everything whole and comfortable just like we thought it used to be? And what was the total affect of the spoken word at those times? Did the words really have only a 7% influence on our hopes and desires? Not likely. Given the emotional impact of prior experience and beliefs, our memories are not about to logically reduce the words of a loved one, or former loved one, to such an insignificant role instantaneously.

Such impersonal and coldly analytical reactions are probably destined to remain in the safety aloof confines of the experimental laboratory with its pretend situations and imaginary interactions. Perhaps we could benefit from a re-assessment of old acquired beliefs in the glaring light of real life relationship reactions and perceptions.

## References

Buscaqlia, Leo. (1982). *Living, loving, & learning*. Charles B. Slack, Inc.

Mehrabian, Albert. (1972). *Nonverbal communication*. Aldine Atherton, Inc.

Mehrabian, Albert. (1971). *Silent Messages*. Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Mehrabian, Albert; Ferris, Susan. (1967). *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol. 31. No. 3. Pg. 248\_252.

Mehrabian, Albert; Wiener, Morton. (1967). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 6, No. 1. Pg. 109\_114.

## Author

Dr. C. E. "Buzz" Johnson, retired Optometrist, has been through Master Practitioner and Trainer's Training. He has been researching the power of words in a variety of different disciplines, medicine, education, addictions, relationships, psycho-neuro-immunology, hypnosis, psychotherapy, etc.

Quoted by Permission from Dr. Johnson, Published originally in *Anchor Point*, July 1994.