

Proxemics: The Study of Space

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“Thousand of experiences teach us, that space communicates”

E.T.Hall (1990 p 161)

The search for the lingual foundations of human culture will lead to non verbal communication without which the diversity and sophistication of today’s language system would be impossible. While commenting on the significance of non verbal communication in the evolution of human language, Harrison and Crouch (1972) suggest that “in the development of each human being, non verbal communication precedes and perhaps structures all subsequent communication.” (p 77).

When our communication is supplemented by the aspects of non verbal cues, – like facial expression, gestures etc- its message paired with the lexical content, makes the interpretation of the sender’s meaning complete. Albert Mehrabian, a professor of Psychology, estimates that 55% of the impact of a message, which reaches the listener, is through the non verbal mode. With his experiments he suggests,

“Total impact (in the listener) = (0.07 verbal + 0.38 Vocal + 0.55 Non Verbal) of the speaker” (p 53)

Today many studies have been conducted, to understand the various aspects of non verbal communication. The scholars, in this field have brought out the various classifications regarding the types, factors and the influences of the non verbal communication.

Knapp’s (1971), one of the scholars in this field has classified non verbal communication in the following way.

.	Environmental Factor	It consists of elements such as furniture, architectural style, lighting, smells, colors and temperature.
.	Proxemics	It is defined as the use and perception of one’s social and personal space, such as in seating and spatial arrangements.
.	Kinesics	It is defined as body motions that include gestures, body movements, postures, facial and eye behaviors.
.	Touching Behavior	It deals with the touching behavior of an individual
.	Physical Characteristic	It comprises of personal characteristics such as physique, breath odor, height, weight, hair and skin color.

.	Paralanguage	It consists of nonverbal cues surrounding speech, such as pitch, volume, tempo and intensity of the voice.
.	Artifacts	The manipulated objects that are in contact with the interacting persons such as perfume, clothes, lipstick, hair pieces, eyeglasses and miscellaneous beauty aids.

Among seven different aspects mentioned above, Proxemics has attracted many researches belonging to multiple disciplines like Culture, Psychology, Architecture etc. The Proxemics behavior becomes an important field of study as it widens the research in the area of non verbal communication.

The term Proxemics - denoting, “The study of how human beings communicate through their use of space”- was coined by E.T.Hall, an Anthropologist by profession. He defines the term as, “The spatial dimension of non verbal behavior” (Hall 1963; p 122). It has created a revolution in this field and has given a new dimension to the study of non verbal communication. He popularized this theory through his two books entitled The Silent Language (1959) and The Hidden Dimension (1966) which brought him a great fame.

As we all know, “Humans are territorial animals, everyday people claim space, built on it and this way, mark their territory” (Hall 1989; p: 59). For an instance, a student feels uncomfortable in a class, when he finds his seat to be taken by someone else. This gives a vulnerable feeling that someone has invaded his/her personal space or territory. This, in general shows that the people are anchored in space and have developed a strong sense of territory.

Blyth, an expert in the field, while talking about Proxemics states that, ‘Hall sets forth a theory about how people react to others at various distances from their own bodies, indicating thereby a sense of territoriality, similar to that shown by animals or birds and develops notation for this purpose.’ (Blyth 1976; p 117)

In simple words, Proxemics can be defined as the study of means in which individuals make use of the physical space in the interaction between the individuals. Each and every organism in the universe tries to occupy, cultivate, preserve and utilize space. This process of owning the space by above said means differ from culture to culture. People often feel uncomfortable when operating in the spaces different from those in which they are familiar.

There are three fundamental areas with which the experts in the field categorize Proxemics

1.Distance

2. Spaces

3. Modes of behavior and perception

A brief description of the above said fundamental areas of Proxemics as follows:

1. DISTANCE:

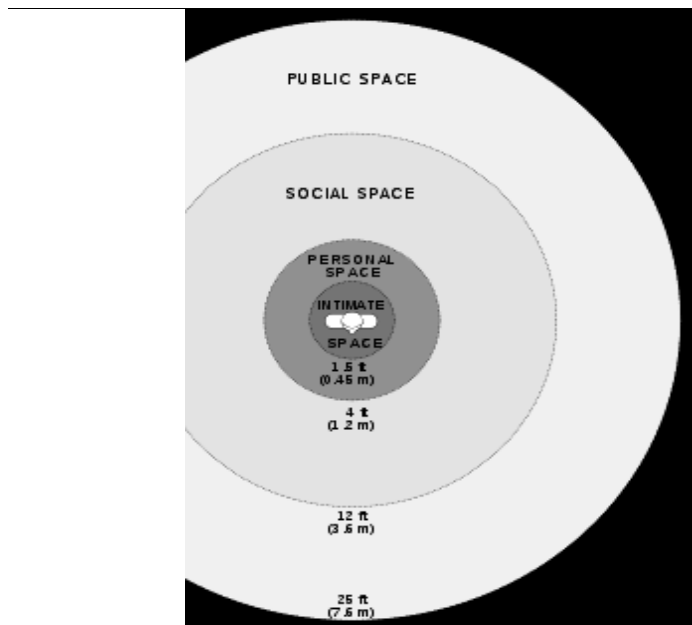
Based on observation in social situations, Hall classifies the distance as,

a) **Intimate Distance (0-1.5 ft)** - This zone is mainly for non verbal communication. Only the intimate people like members of the family and friends can enter into it. It is considered improper for the public places.

b) **Personal Distance (1.5 ft- 3 ft)** – This zone is popularly known as the *Bubble* and it is meant for the people who are well known to us. It varies in different cultures and depends on individual's personality and the style of communication.

c) **Social Distance (4 ft-11 ft)** – This zone is meant for general gatherings and business meetings or generally interacting with someone who is not particularly well known.

d) **Public Distance (12 ft-25ft)** – In this zone only public interaction is possible. It demands louder voice, more formal style of language and reduced speech rate.



Source:

Source: Edward Hall Proxemics Diagram showing radius in feet

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Personal_Space.svg

2. SPACE

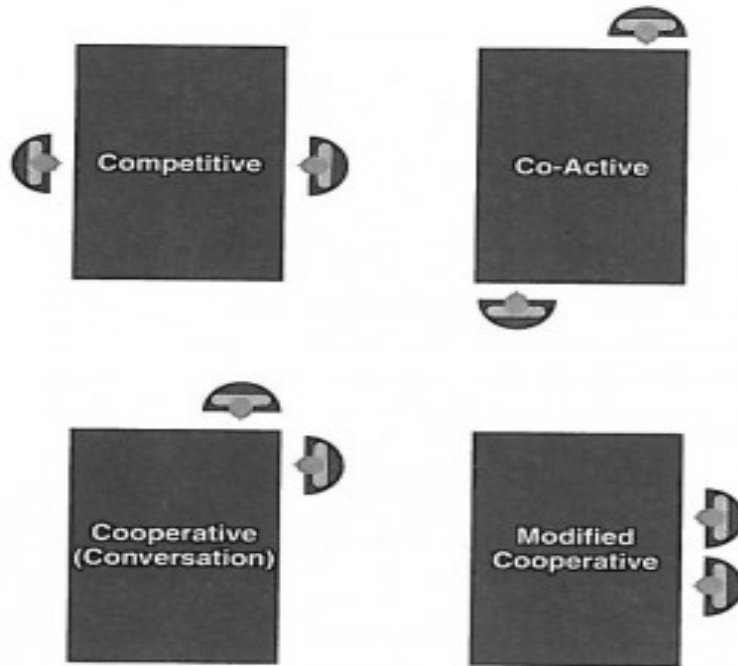
The representation of space is only briefly dealt within Hall's Proxemics. He distinguishes three categories of space.

- a) **Fixed Feature Space:** This space is formed by walls and territorial buildings. For example Houses, Buildings, Cities, Class rooms etc. The use of the class room space could either make the students comfortable or uncomfortable, feel motivated or demotivated.
- b) **Semi fixed space:** This category of space is more important in interpersonal communication. In this, the objects are already fixed and the position of the objects and the space resulted provide details on the nature of the interaction as well as the status of the participants. This category of space is sub divided into two. They are,
 - **Sociofugal Space:** It keeps the people away from the process of communication. It transmits connotative meanings such as large, cold, impersonal and so on.
 - **Sociopetal Space:** It brings the people together and stimulates involvement in the process of communication

In their book **Small Group and Team Communication**, Thomas E. Harris and John C. Sherblom suggest us some ways in which seating arrangements can be used to facilitate communication between the members.

“Individuals sitting across a table from each other maximize their interpersonal distance, increase their potential for sending and receiving both verbal and nonverbal messages and thus perhaps conflicting messages, and increase the likelihood of becoming competitive. Sitting with a corner of the table between participants reduces interpersonal distance, focuses attention on the project and materials rather than on the individuals' non verbal's, and may help enhance the cooperativeness of the participants. Sitting side by side reduces the interpersonal distance still farther and, unless that interpersonal distance is too intimate to feel comfortable, may also be a cooperative seating arrangement” (118)

These types of [seating arrangements](#) are displayed in the following diagram illustrated in figure 6.1 in Harris and Sherblom's book **Small Group and Team Communication:**



- c) **Informal Space:** This refers to the private space which people maintain when they interact. According to Hall, “informal spatial patterns have distinct bounds and such deep if unvoiced, significance that they form an essential part of culture. To misunderstand this significance may invite disaster.” (Hall 1959; p: 112).

3. MODES OF BEHAVIOR AND PERCEPTION

The third fundamental area describes the eight variables of Proxemics behavior identified by Hall which acts as an extension of the research in this field. They are,

1.	Postural-Sex Identifier	It refers to the postural status and sex identities of the participants in the interaction
2.	Sociofugal and Sociopetal Axis	It refers to the positioning of one’s shoulders and face which will encourage or discourage the process of communication.
3.	Kinesthetic Factor	It refers to the distance between the individuals which provides capability to touch each other.
4.	Touch Code	It deals with the individuals manner of touching one another

5.	Visual Code	It refers to the eye contact with reference to the space between the individuals.
6.	Voice Loudness	It refers to the loudness of the voice with reference to the space between the individuals.
7.	Thermal Code	It refers to the heat transmitted from the individuals' bodies with reference to the space.
8.	Olfaction Code	It refers to the individual's degree of breath and odors that can be felt by the other individual standing next to him.

Thus, the understanding of the above mentioned eight variables of the Proxemic behavior gives an ability to read the behavior of the participant in an interaction.

Conclusion:

Proxemic research is based on the concept of territoriality. Territoriality is a basic concept in the study of animal behaviour. It is defined as behaviour by which an organism characteristically lays claim to an area and defends it against members of its own and other species. Most individuals are generally unaware of the norms of Proxemic behavior within their culture, but they do become conscious of them when these norms are violated or when they notice differences in spatial behavior due to the norms of foreign culture.

In nutshell, this paper explains the scope of research that can be done in this field. Since, the study of space plays a significant role in social, cultural and economic spheres of the world, the researchers in this field have to be encouraged to understand the above said disciplines at a wider perspective. This will, for sure, dispel the myth hidden in the field of Proxemics for a decade (Baldassare and Susan Feller 1975; p: 496).

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