Jen Psaki: Differences in Visual Nonverbal Behavior

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Group 11, April 3rd, 2015
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Keywords: Visual nonverbal behavior; politics; scripted and unscripted answers; press conferences; ECSI.

Abstract

This study explores the differences in visual nonverbal behavior of Jen Psaki, spokesperson for the United States Department of State. The differences are measured in two conditions: scripted and unscripted answers to questions asked by journalists. A corpus of videos was constructed using a collection of recorded press conferences regarding the Ukraine crisis. The ECSI coding scheme was used in order to correctly observe and code Psaki's body language. The study showed that there was significantly more nonverbal behavior in the unscripted condition. These results suggest that people tend to be more nonverbally expressive when giving spontaneous answers.

Introduction

'Can you tell when a politician is lying? When he moves his lips!' (Ekman, 1985). However, not only words are important in conveying a message - all other nonverbal signals play a crucial role in the communication process. Nonverbal signals are everywhere, people constantly receive them from and transmit them to other people (Knapp & Hall, 2009). According to Kidwell and Hasford "our ability to understand and use nonverbal signals is a powerful tool for expressing our feelings, managing impressions, influencing others, and forming and defining relationships" (Kidwell & Hasford, 2014). As described by Duncan (1969) nonverbal communication includes features as 'body motion, facial expressions, gestures, eye movement, body posture and tone of voice'.

Nonverbal behavior can vary across different communication contexts. Research conducted by Chawla and Krauss (1994) aimed to identify whether the occurrence of hand gestures differs between spontaneous and rehearsed communication contexts. Their findings showed that in both conditions (spontaneous and rehearsed) speakers approximately used the same amount of gestures. However, the hand gestures during spontaneous speech potentially served a different purpose than the gestures during rehearsed speech (Chawla & Krauss, 1994).

In line with Chawla and Krauss' research (1994), this study explores the visual nonverbal behavior of Jen Psaki, a spokesperson for the United States' Department of State. Psaki answers journalist's questions during conferences regarding the United States foreign policy and actions. Some of the answers that are given are spontaneous (unscripted); others are read from a prepared statement (scripted). The focus of this study lies on Psaki's facial expressions and hand gestures in the aforementioned conditions. The research question is: what are the differences in Jen Psaki's visual nonverbal behavior between scripted or unscripted answers? From this research question, the following hypotheses can be identified:

H0: there is no significant difference in visual nonverbal behavior between the scripted and the unscripted condition;

H1: there is significantly more visual nonverbal behavior in the unscripted condition.

Stimuli Collection

Selection Criteria and Procedure

YouTube was used as a database for stimuli collection. The Ukrainian crisis was chosen as topic of interest. This is due to the Department's prevalent coverage of the crisis, leading to numerous videos being available. The collection of videos was partially random. In order to maintain homogeneity of the dataset a criteria required Jen Psaki to appear in the same setting (the official US State Department conference). Figures 1 and 2 show snapshots from the appropriate setting in both conditions.

Figure 1. A snapshot from the non-scripted condition. Reprinted from *YouTube* website. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jW1WDbDX7wE

Figure 2. A snapshot from the scripted condition. Reprinted from *YouTube* website. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bg9X0eNFds

The search term 'Jen Psaki - Ukraine' was entered into the YouTube search engine. Out of the search results, the first 19 videos that presented Jen Psaki during a conference were selected. Additionally, each video had to contain at least one question and a full answer. These videos were downloaded using the YouTube downloader application for Mac. Afterwards, the videos were analyzed in pairs to determine whether Jen Psaki's answers were scripted or unscripted. Two pairs analyzed 6 videos and one pair examined 7 videos. To increase inter-rater reliability, each pair cross-checked the videos of the other pairs.

Scripted answers were defined as partially prepared statements prior to the conference. During scripted answers it is clear that Psaki uses notes to support the answer. Unscripted answers were defined as clearly not being supported by any notes. In unscripted answers it was clear that Psaki was improvising.

Video Editing

From the 19 videos, 40 fragments (20 scripted/20 unscripted) were selected for the final dataset. Each video fragment was cut into a shorter version using iMovie, containing the journalist's question and the first 20 seconds of Psaki's answer. This was done to ensure that all videos were of comparable length, making the dataset more homogeneous.

Coding

The Ethological Coding Scheme for Interviews (ECSI) (Troisi & Moles, 1999) was used to code the videos. The choice for this coding scheme was based on its categories and adjustability. The scheme included categories regarding facial expressions, body posture, hand gestures and additional body language features. Coding took place in pairs to ensure all movements were noted. In order to make the coding process consistent across pairs, the first video of both conditions was coded by all group members. After, the videos were divided evenly among the group members and each pair coded videos according to the ECSI scheme.

In order to increase inter-rater reliability, a second check was carried out for 50% of the videos. This meant that each pair coded 3 videos of another pair. The coding results that were consistent in the first and second check were immediately used as a 'final agreement'. However, it appeared that the first and second check were inconsistent for most of the videos.

Consequently, a second check for the remaining 50% of the data was carried out, making it a 100% coding check in total. However, in order to resolve the inconsistent scores a meeting was arranged and the disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached.

Once the entire coding process was finished, it was decided to only choose the most prevalent categories from the ECSI coding scheme, namely: look at, affiliation, gestures and flight. The ECSI coding scheme identifies gestures very generally. Therefore, this category was specified based on gestures particular for Jen Psaki's nonverbal behavior. Please refer to the appendix for the final coding scheme used for this research.

Results

This experiment employs a within-subject design. The dataset consisted of one independent variable "condition", with two levels (scripted, unscripted questions) and 20 dependent variables for each level (look_journalist, head_to_side, bob, flash, raise, smile, fold_hands, spread_hands, counting_with_fingers, chopping_r, one_hand_r, chopping_l, one_hand_l, juggling, look_away, look_down, shut, chin, crouch, still).

To investigate the research question an independent samples t-test was performed. The distribution was normal and represented a bell-shaped curve. There was no significant skewness but there was some kurtosis (z-score skewness = 0.00, z-score kurtosis = - 2.87). Because of the significant kurtosis, the p-value may not be the best indicator to determine whether there is a significant difference and more attention should be given to the bootstrapped confidence interval. In this sample, flash (Mdif = 0.65, t(38) = 3.57, p = .001, 95% CI (.28, 1.01) scores higher on average for unscripted answers than for the scripted ones (Mscr = 0.00, Munscr = .65). The same accounts for both spread_hands (Mdif = 1.90, t(34) = 3.442, p = .00, 95% CI (.77, 3.02), Mscr = .60, Munscr = 2.50) and for look_away (Mdif = 2.15, t(37) = 2.71, p = .010, 95% CI (.54, 3.75), Mscr = 2.00, Munscr = 4.15).

The only exception is look_down (Mdif = -2.75, t(38) = -4.12, p = .000, 95% CI (-4.10, -1.39) which scores higher for the scripted condition (Mscr = 6.05, Munscr = 3.30). Out of 20 dependent variables, only four (flash, spread_hands, look_away and look_down) were significant ($p<.05$) at 95% confidence interval. Spread_hands, look_down and look_away all had unequal variances assumed. Moreover, affiliation, smile and flash had equal variances assumed. Due to considerable differences between conditions (Mscr = .35, Munscr = .90) it can be argued that, although not significant, smile is a trend (Mdif = 0.55, t(38) = 1.946, p = .059, 95% CI (-.022, 1.122). Moreover, the dependent variables were grouped into four categories in order to compute them into the following new variables: affiliation, gestures, flight and look at journalist.

Furthermore, one of the four categories showed significant results, namely: affiliation (Mdif = 1.350, t(38) = 2.842, p = .007, 95% CI (.388, 2.311). This means that there is a significant difference in scripted and unscripted answers in this category (Mscr = .60, Munscr = 1.95). This category included the following variables: head_to_side, bob, flash, raise and smile.

In conclusion, the results show partial support for the hypothesis that there are more nonverbal behaviors in the unscripted condition.

Conclusion and discussion

This research has provided some valuable insights into the differences in nonverbal behavior between scripted and unscripted answers. The results partially confirm H1, proving that there is more nonverbal behavior in the unscripted condition when it comes to certain actions. As a result of this, H0 is rejected.

Hand gestures

Robert Krauss (1998) argues that people use more hand gestures in spontaneous speech, rather than when speech is rehearsed. This might be due to the fact that hand gestures help to recover the lexicon and concepts used in order to explain ideas. Consequently, in rehearsed speech everything is re-coded or memorized, while in spontaneous speech words still need to be retrieved from the mental lexicon.

As described by Krauss, Chen and Chawla (1996), spreading hands could be assigned to conversational gestures and more accurately to lexical movements (hand movements that vary considerably in length, are non-repetitive, complex and changing in form, and appear related to the semantic content of the speech they accompany). Given the fact that Jen Psaki uses more spread_hand gestures in the unscripted condition, it can be argued that when speaking spontaneously Psaki needs more effort to retrieve words from her mental lexicon, resulting in an increased use of hand gestures.

Eyebrow flash

Raising one's eyebrows originates from an expression of surprise (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1977). People raise their eyebrows when confronted with an unexpected situation or event. The results from this study suggest that Psaki raises her eyebrows more often in the unscripted condition. This might be due to the fact that the questions in the unscripted condition are much less anticipated than the questions in the scripted condition, and might be coming as a surprise. However, there is much more to eyebrows movements. For instance, research conducted by Guaïtella et al. (2009) suggests that quick raising and lowering of the eyebrows can serve as a means for attention. A speaker could use this facial expression to show that he or she would like to take the turn. Furthermore, whilst speaking eyebrow movements can indicate what exactly is important about the things being said (Guaïtella et al., 2009). These findings could be an explanation of Psaki's use of eyebrow movements. Perhaps she raises her eyebrows more often in the unscripted condition, due to the fact that people tend to accentuate more what is important in the things they say in spontaneous (unscripted) speech. However, further research would be advisable to gain more insights into eyebrow movement in scripted and unscripted contexts.

Eye-movement

The reason for eye movement during speech is still largely unclear to researchers (Ehrlichman, 2006). Though, Ehrlichman managed to discover a tendency in humans towards more eye-movement when something from the long-term memory had to be recalled. Applying this finding to the results of this study, it can be argued that during unscripted answers Jen Psaki needs to engage in higher cognitive functions (such as concepts recollection from her memory). Arguably this could explain the rapid and regular eye movements in the unscripted condition. Assuming that Psaki as a professional public speaker is aware of the importance of eye contact when questioned, it is advisable to investigate her eye movement in further detail in order to gain more insight into the reasons behind Jen Psaki's eye movement.

Limitations

The ECSI coding scheme presents a number of limitations. Firstly, every coding scheme and video analysis raises issues of subjectivity. For example, not every coder has the same perception of what a bob is. Second of all, the scheme is very broad and it does not differentiate between specific features of actions. For instance, the scheme identifies a smile but does not give any indication what kind of a smile it is. It is important to note that looking_down can be explained by the fact that Psaki is supporting her answers with notes. Therefore it can be argued that the significant results for this action in the scripted condition are due to this fact. Even if this would not be the case, looking_down might still present significant differences between the two conditions. Further research is advisable to state such conclusion with certainty. Moreover, it is very likely that Jen Psaki has been professionally trained in nonverbal communication. This can be recognized as a confounding variable in this research. It is advisable to conduct further research to assess the importance of body language training in public appearance.

Future research

The statistical analysis has indicated a trend for smile, meaning that the difference in conditions for this variable was almost significant. In the event of a larger sample size this difference might become significant and further support the hypothesis. Additionally, as mentioned before a more detailed analysis of particular facial expressions and body movements is needed. For example, defining smile into greater detail would present a better insight into this particular facial expression and provide a better understanding of Jen Psaki's nonverbal behavior.

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Appendix

Table 1 shows the final coding scheme that was used in this study, adapted from Troisi and Moles (1999). The following variables were added additionally to the original coding scheme: *fold hands, spread hands, counting with fingers, chopping right, chopping left, one hand gesture right, one hand gesture left, juggling*.

Table 1
List of behavioral categories and definitions of behavior patterns.

Look at	*Look at*: looking at the journalist
Affiliation	*Head to side*: the head is tilted to one side *Bob*: a sharp upwards movement *Flash*: a quick raising and lowering of the eyebrows *Raise*: the eyebrows are raised and kept up for some time *Smile*: the lip corners are drawn back and up
Gesture	*Fold hands*: folding hands together *Spread hands*: move hands away from each other *Counting with fingers*: counting with fingers *Chopping right*: right hand movement suggesting chopping *Chopping left*: left hand movement suggesting chopping *One hand gesture right*: variable one-hand movements used during speech *One hand gesture left*: variable one-hand movements used during speech *Juggling*: rotating movement with both hands
Flight	*Look away*: looking away from the journalist *Look down*: looking down at lectern *Shut*: the eyes are closed for some time *Chin*: the chin is drawn in towards the chest *Crouch*: the body is bent right forward till the head is near the knees *Still*: a sudden cessation of movement, a freezing

Note. Original general table note. Adapted from "Gender differences in depression: an ethological study of nonverbal behavior during interviews" by A. Troisi, A. Moles, 1999, *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 33, p. 246.