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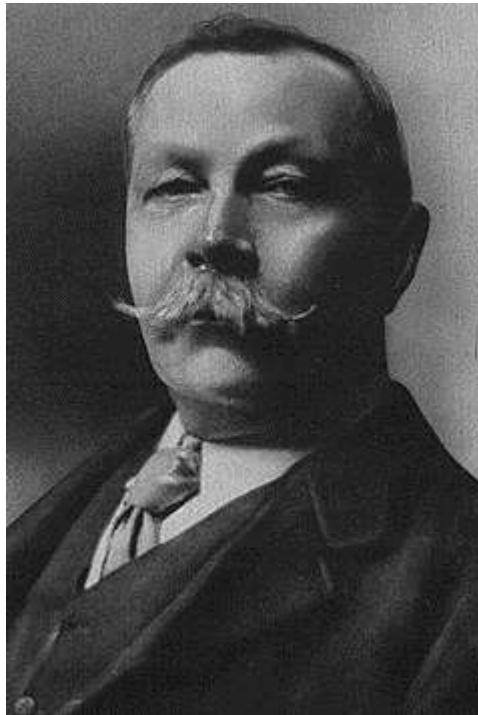
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Kinesics in Arthur Conan Doyle

K. Sangeetha, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Conan_Doyle

An Indian Definition of Body Language

Body language, also called 'Kinesics', is an outward reflection of a person's emotional condition. The *Panchatantra* defines body language thus:

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From feature, gesture, gait,
From twitch, or word,
From change in eye or face
Is thought inferred. (25).

Doyle's Use of Body Language

Arthur Conan Doyle, in his Sherlock Holmes stories, makes dexterous use of body language. Sustained interest, an essential quality in detective fiction, is made possible through non-verbal communication. The reader finds that one has to be careful in this cerebral quest, not to miss anything. The thrust is not only in the words and their associated tone but also in the non-verbal elements attached to the rendering. In fact, many a time, Doyle emphasizes that it is body language that guides Holmes, the protagonist, towards truth, while words belie.

Albert Mehrabian, a pioneer researcher of body language in 1950s, found that “the total impact of a message is about 7% verbal (words only) and 38% vocal (including tone of voice, inflection and other sounds) and 55% nonverbal” (qtd. in Allan 9). Holmes's *Book of Life* explains the use of body language:

By a man's fingernails, by his coat sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser, knees, by the calluses of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs, by his movements—by all of these things, a man's calling is plainly revealed (Doyle Vol 1: 14-15).

This quotation is so relevant that it has been given as the introduction to *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, published in 2005. Doyle's contribution is up to date.

Some Instances of the Use of Body Language

There are other instances involving body language in the works of Arthur Canon Doyle. In *The Adventure of the Three Gables*, Holmes finds that Susan, a servant, acts as a spy for a criminal. He asks details about the criminal and corrects himself on studying Susan's body language. “So, a rich man? No, you smiled; a rich woman” (Doyle Vol.3: 565). In *The Adventure of the Yellow Face*, a client tells Holmes about the strange behaviour of his wife:

She gave a violent start and a kind of gasping cry when I spoke, and that cry and start troubled me more than all the rest, for there was something indescribably guilty about them.... All the time that she was telling me this story she never once looked in my direction and her voice was quite unlike her usual tones. It was evident to me that she was saying what was false (Doyle Vol 2: 40).

Body Language versus Verbal Language

Doyle makes use of body language as against the verbal language to prove how the former can help in identifying the truth when words seem deceptive. In *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle*, Doyle makes use of eye contact to identify the criminal's real identity.

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When asked for his name, the man hesitates for an instant, “My name is John Robinson,” he answers with a sidelong glance. “No, no; the real name,” says Holmes sweetly. “It is always awkward doing business with an alias” (Doyle Vol. 1: 375).

Body Language in Aid of Discovery

In *A Study in Scarlet*, when the detective narrates his exploits, Holmes speaks as if he is interested. But his body language betrays his lack of interest. “ ‘It’s quite exciting,’ said Sherlock Holmes, with a yawn” (Doyle Vol. 1: 45). Holmes studies even Watson’s body language and reads his mind often. He tells Watson, “The features are given to man as the means by which he shall express his emotions, and yours are faithful servants” (Doyle Vol. 2: 160). According to *The Definitive book of Body language*, “Rubbing the palms together is a way in which people communicate positive expectation” (Allan 129). This gesture is often repeated by Holmes. For instance in “*Silver Blaze*,” Watson says,

“I could see that Holmes was extremely pleased, for he chuckled and rubbed his hands together” (Doyle Vol. 2: 23).

Body Language, Symbol and Metaphor

Researchers on gestures have identified the steeple of fingers as follows: “We have found that the steeple was frequently used in superior subordinate interaction and that it indicates a confident or self-assured attitude” (Allan 133). The steeple is one of Holmes’s favourite poses and it reveals his nature also. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Dr. Mortimer tells the details of Sir Charles’s death and Holmes “leaned back, put his finger-tips together and assumed his most impassive and judicial expression” (Doyle Vol. 3: 20).

Doyle employs gestures, postures and facial expressions to tell the detective and the reader that there is more than what is said through the language as narration or conversation. Kinesics is a very remarkable tool with contemporary relevance to get to the truth in any situation—formal, as in investigations or business transactions or informal, as in day-to-day exchanges.

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