

NATIONAL POST

September 27, 2016

Clinton and Trump, beyond words: What the handshakes, smiles, grimaces, pointing and sniffles revealed

Douglas Quan

It is often said that for voters, picking a leader has less to do with policy positions and more to do with who you would be most comfortable inviting for dinner. With that in mind, the National Post asked four body-language experts to assess Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's debate performance: Diane Craig, president of Corporate Class, Toronto; Mark Bowden, president of TruthPlane, Toronto; Dave Matsumoto, a psychology professor at San Francisco State University and director of Humintell; and Patti Wood, president of Communication Dynamics, Atlanta.

The handshake

Mark Bowden: Trump gets the advantage position by coming in on the audience's left side, which means his handshaking hand is forward to the camera, which should make his arm bigger. But Clinton does a countermeasure by extending her arm out so he has to withdraw his arm back closer to his body.

Diane Craig: Trump put his hand on her back; that's a sign of superiority when you do that.

Facial expressions

DC: Trump has this natural pout when he listens. Both corners of his mouth go down, like when a child is pouting. I don't know if it's because he's used to getting his way. Another thing he does is his eyebrows go down. It's a definite sign of anger, frustration. Clinton smiled a lot — almost too much. I felt that some of her nervous energy was going into her smile. The amount of smiling she did was betrayed from time to time with deep sighing. It's a little more difficult to read her facial expressions because of her eyebrows — nothing's moving. I was trying to watch, it's like frozen in time.

MB: We saw a look of contempt, a one-sided frown from Trump, and an eye roll when Clinton said she prepared for the evening and 'I prepared to be president.' She pretty much had one signature gesture, which was her smile. For the most part, it was effective and well-executed.

Dave Matsumoto: Looking away and rolling his eyes were unmoderated to some extent. So Trump has more of a perception of genuineness. There's less question about what he's feeling, whereas Clinton has the same pasted expression throughout, a controlled expression, pursing her lips. Much of the time, her smile was asymmetrical. People might interpret it as a smirk and her laughing off of responses feeds into a perception she's standoffish.

Patti Wood: Trump has a broad emotional range. He typically gets very happy and smiles a lot, and then he goes all the way to extreme anger. Broad emotional range actually creates likability in candidates. Clinton does not have broad emotional range and that works against her.

Other gestures

MB: Trump's got some classic gestures that we've become used to. He does that OK gesture with his thumb and index finger, and swaps it for the L shape. It's a precision gesture, he's detailed. Then his hands squeeze together like a mechanical monkey that plays the cymbals. We also saw the 'You're fired' pointing gesture. Whether we like him or not, at least we're getting the brand.

PW: He typically has broad high gestures and lots of weapon-like gestures — pointing, jabbing, stabbing, slicing. You only saw the first edges of those so in that way he didn't look as powerful as he typically does.

DM: Clinton shrugged when asked if she would support the outcome and the will of the people. To me, I don't know whether that was intentional or not. Probably not. A shoulder shrug raises doubts about the credibility of what she's saying. It's typically interpreted as doubt or uncertainty.

Oddities

MB: What was different with Trump this time was the sniff, the big in-draw of air up the nostrils. We hadn't noticed this before with him. It's suggesting he's under more pressure, in that fight or flight area, he's out of his usual comfort zone. When he talked about his tax returns, he adjusted his microphone. That would be an indicator he's showing more anxiety. He needs to start adjusting or augment his environment to feel safer or in control.

The split screen

MB: In the split screen, the camera was having to come in closer on Clinton in order to fill the frame; she's obviously got smaller shoulders than Trump. So her face is always bigger on the screen. It causes her to look more powerful. She was a lot stiller too. Her gestures were more in the frame, so we could see more of her hands, whereas Trump's gestures were outside of the frame. Good choice of Clinton wearing that block red. That's aggressive.

DC: That red suit was not an accident, it speaks power. It's a very structured jacket. There's nothing distracting about what she wore. Also, Trump makes a lot of noises with his facial expressions when she speaks. He's so expressive. Even though he doesn't say anything, it's noisy. It's almost like he's interrupting when she speaks.

PW: Something more subtle that I found interesting is though he said that Clinton did not have stamina, she showed even emotion and continuous solid ground throughout the debate. He started out yelling and gesturing, but about 45 minutes in you saw him gesturing less and grimacing more and placing his weight on his arms on the podium. If you look subtly at the musculature of his face, it pulled down toward the end of the debates, showing fatigue.

The takeaway

DC: Clinton seemed to be more in control of her emotions. When we talk about presence, being in control of emotions is critical. I think it made us more confident in her. She did look presidential, there's no question about it.

MB: On the whole, the president we're looking for is the one who can handle pressure. I go for Clinton on that, for sure. Who looked the most presidential? She did. Calm and assertive.

DM: Trump showed he was an emoting human. She showed she was a standoffish, arrogant person. If you watched that debate without words, that's the impression people would come off with. Many people will see it as an advantage; the president should be above immediate, transient reactions on the spur of the moment. Whereas some people will think he was more genuine and showed more empathy to what the common people are like.

PW: Clinton couldn't do the full range of things men do: she couldn't grimace, couldn't growl. That smile was bizarre in some cases, but I would've coached her to do the same thing. It's a forced choice. She was masterful in how calm and composed she was.

Comments were edited for clarity and brevity.