

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF FACIAL EXPRESSIONS IN TIV CONVERSATION

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Abstract

This paper investigates a semiotic analysis of facial expressions in Tiv conversation. The aim of the seminar is to examine nonverbal communicative functions of facial expressions in Tiv conversations using Paul Ekman's theory of universal facial expressions as a theoretical framework. While Ekman posits that certain facial expressions such as anger, joy, fear, and contempt are biologically innate and universally recognised; This study applies his model within a semiotic framework to explore how these expressions are culturally interpreted and deployed in Tiv interpersonal communication. Data were drawn from 10 respondents in naturalistic Tiv interactions and analysed semiotically to reveal how these expressions function as icons, indexes, and symbols that complement or replace verbal speech. The study identifies key facial expressions such as Duchenne smiles, furrowed brows, and jaw clenching as semiotic signs that index emotional states and social intentions. The findings reveal that facial expressions in Tiv conversations serve as structured communicative tools, functioning both as complements to speech and as independent conveyors of meaning. These expressions are used to affirm, contradict verbal statements, and they play crucial roles in emotion regulation, respect signaling, and social alignment. For instance, tightened lips often signal restrained disagreement, while a turned-away face may indicate subtle disapproval. The study further finds that although facial expressions are universal in form, their use and interpretation are deeply rooted in Tiv cultural norms, especially within age, gender, and hierarchical relationships. The research concludes that facial expressions are indispensable to Tiv discourse, functioning as a silent language of cultural performance and emotional negotiation. It recommends the inclusion of nonverbal communication in linguistic and anthropological studies of African languages and calls for the training of cultural mediators to recognise these signs. Future research should expand to include other nonverbal modalities such as gestures and eye movement across diverse Tiv-speaking communities.

Keywords: Semiotic analysis, Facial expressions, Tiv conversations.

Introduction

Human conversation is a fundamental mode of communication, serving as a dynamic medium for expressing thoughts, emotions, and social relationships. According to Cameron (2016), conversation is “a collaborative, interactive process of verbal and nonverbal exchange between two or more participants, governed by social norms and aimed at constructing shared meaning in real time” (p. 35). This definition is particularly relevant in the Tiv context, where facial expressions, silence, gestures, and eye movements play an essential role in shaping the flow and interpretation of everyday interactions. Conversation operates within the larger framework of communication, which includes verbal, nonverbal, and written modes of meaning-making. In Tiv conversational settings, facial expressions often serve as crucial communicative tools, silently complementing or contradicting what is spoken. The effectiveness of a speaker in

Tiv discourse depends not only on verbal fluency but also on their ability to deploy facial cues that align with cultural expectations and emotional nuance.

Verbal and nonverbal communication thus functions as complementary systems in Tiv interpersonal interactions. Okolo and Ojonugwa (2021) affirm that “verbal communication relies on linguistic symbols, while nonverbal communication depends on bodily expressions, spatial positioning, and prosodic features to transmit meaning” (p. 119). Facial expressions, in particular, are central to this system. They often affirm, contradict, or nuance verbal messages, making communication more emotionally resonant and socially cohesive. In Tiv dialogues, a raised eyebrow may question authority, while a smile may reconcile tension. Ignoring these facial signals would amount to overlooking critical layers of meaning in Tiv speech.

Nonverbal communication encompasses a broad range of visual and bodily cues, but facial expressions remain the most immediate and universally interpreted. Adegbite (2023) notes that facial expressions convey core emotions such as joy, anger, fear, and contempt, functioning as powerful communicative tools across cultures. Within Tiv interpersonal conversations, these expressions are not merely reactions—they are culturally coded responses. For example, a downward gaze may indicate respect, while clenched jaws and tightened lips may signal restrained anger during contentious discussions. Such facial cues are integral to interpreting the emotional tone and social positioning of participants in everyday interactions.

Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, provides a compelling theoretical lens for analysing these nonverbal communicative acts. Nwoye (2021) defines semiotics as the study of how meaning is generated and interpreted

through both linguistic and non-linguistic signs. In the context of Tiv conversations, facial expressions operate as semiotic units, each signifying specific emotional or social messages. A Duchenne smile, for instance, can be seen as an iconic sign of genuine joy, while nostril flaring may function indexically, pointing to inner anger. These expressions are not accidental; they are culturally conditioned communicative strategies embedded in the Tiv way of speaking.

The Tiv culture is embedded with facial expressions as a nonverbal communication strategy. It is crucial for accurate interpretation and mutual respect in communication. This study enables a more nuanced understanding of how Tiv speakers use facial cues to negotiate meaning, assert emotions, and maintain social cohesion. Against this background, the researcher is motivated to conduct a semiotic investigation into the communicative functions of facial expressions in Tiv conversations.

Statement of the Problem

Human conversation is not limited to spoken words; it is a multimodal process that relies heavily on nonverbal cues, especially facial expressions, to construct and interpret meaning. In Tiv conversations, facial expressions such as raised eyebrows, clenched jaws, or averted gazes are integral components of interpersonal communication, conveying emotions, social status, and intentions that often remain unspoken. Yet, despite their central role in Tiv interaction, scholarly attention has disproportionately focused on the verbal dimensions of Tiv language, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics while neglecting the semiotic role of facial expressions.

This scholarly gap limits the holistic understanding of Tiv conversational practices and creates room for misinterpretation, particularly in intercultural or intergenerational exchanges where facial expressions serve as essential tools for emotion regulation

and social alignment. As globalisation and cultural contact intensify, the risk of losing these nonverbal cultural codes becomes more pronounced. Therefore, without a focused examination of how facial expressions function communicatively and semiotically in Tiv discourse, a vital dimension of the culture remains underexplored. This study addresses this critical gap by offering a semiotic analysis of facial expressions in Tiv conversations, grounded in Paul Ekman's theory of universal facial expressions, to highlight how meaning is silently constructed and socially negotiated in Tiv society.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the communicative functions and cultural meanings of facial expressions in Tiv conversations through a semiotic lens, using Paul Ekman's theory of universal facial expressions as a theoretical framework. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. identify the common facial expressions used as nonverbal cues in Tiv conversations.
- ii. analyse the semiotic and communicative functions of these facial expressions within Tiv interpersonal interactions.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically semiotic analysis guided by Paul Ekman's Theory, to deeply explore nonverbal cues in Tiv communication, on facial expressions for meaning-making. To gather facial expressions, the paper focused on 10 purposively sampled fluent Tiv speakers from various social, educational, and occupational backgrounds within the Makurdi metropolis, Benue State, Nigeria. Data was collected through structured interviews, participant observation with

detailed field notes. The collected data underwent semiotic analysis. Paul Ekman's Theory serves as the analytical framework, providing insights into how facial expressions contribute to meaning-making.

Literature Review

Conversation

Conversation is widely recognised as a co-constructed and dynamic process through which individuals exchange meaning in real time. According to Cameron (2016), "conversation is not merely about exchanging words, but a socially governed process where meaning is collaboratively built through both what is said and how it is said" (p. 28). This perspective foregrounds the interpersonal and culturally embedded nature of conversation, making it particularly relevant for analysing Tiv interactions where gestures and expressions are integral. Building on this, Adeyanju (2019) asserts that "conversation in African societies functions as a participatory space

where both verbal and nonverbal forms of expression combine to maintain social relationships and negotiate cultural values” (p. 47). This underscores the importance of recognising nonverbal signs in conversations, particularly in collectivist cultures such as the Tiv. Nwankwo (2023) explains that “in indigenous communication systems, conversation is not just a medium of expression but a culturally structured performance governed by community expectations and shared symbols” (p. 63). Thus, in Tiv society, conversation encompasses more than speech; it is a performance of social roles mediated by verbal and nonverbal signs.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is essential in human interaction, as it conveys affective, relational, and contextual meaning. According to Eze and Ojukwu (2018), “nonverbal communication is the transmission of messages through facial expressions,

gestures, posture, and other bodily cues that complement or contradict spoken words” (p. 114). Their work highlights how these cues enrich spoken interaction by adding emotional texture. In a related study, Okonkwo (2020) affirms that “nonverbal behaviours are more than embellishments to speech; they are integral to how messages are interpreted, especially in cultures that value indirectness and contextual cues” (p. 93). This resonates strongly with Tiv culture, where nonverbal acts such as silence or eye movement carry potent meanings. Moreover, Musa (2021) stresses that “nonverbal communication is often more trustworthy than verbal language because it is harder to manipulate and more likely to reveal true emotions” (p. 39). This reinforces the relevance of studying facial expressions in Tiv conversations where subtle emotional shifts are culturally significant.

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions are a key modality of nonverbal communication,

serving as immediate indicators of emotional and interpersonal states. Ekong and Etim (2017) argue that “facial expressions serve as universal markers of emotion that operate within culturally specific frameworks of interpretation” (p. 57). Their assertion supports the use of Paul Ekman’s theory while acknowledging cultural nuances. In support, Ibrahim (2020) notes that “facial expressions are used not only to communicate emotions but to regulate conversation, express power dynamics, and signal agreement or dissent in African communicative settings” (p. 101). This insight shows how facial expressions function beyond emotion, particularly in Tiv discourse. Furthermore, Ijeoma (2023) explains that “in face-to-face communication, facial expressions such as frowns, smiles, and raised eyebrows are semiotic resources that audiences decode based on shared cultural knowledge” (p. 82). Hence, a semiotic analysis of facial expressions in Tiv conversations provides a pathway to

understanding the unspoken dimensions of communication.

Semiotics

Semiotics, the study of signs, is essential for analysing how meaning is constructed through nonverbal elements in communication. According to Alabi (2019), “semiotics enables researchers to examine how signs such as gestures, facial expressions, and spatial arrangements produce meaning in culturally situated interactions” (p. 70). This perspective is central to this study, which seeks to decode facial expressions as signs. Similarly, Bello (2021) posits that “semiotic analysis reveals the symbolic, indexical, and iconic properties of nonverbal cues, helping to uncover how these signs function within specific cultural frameworks” (p. 29). In the context of Tiv conversations, such analysis would reveal how certain facial expressions point to emotions, intentions, or social roles. Nwachukwu (2022) further argues that “semiotics bridges the gap between language and culture by showing

how meaning is not only said but also shown, felt, and implied” (p. 110). Through semiotics, this study aims to interpret how Tiv speakers use facial expressions as nonverbal communicative tools.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Paul Ekman’s Theory of Universal Facial Expressions. Paul Ekman’s theory of universal facial expressions emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s through cross-cultural research on emotion and facial behaviour. Ekman, along with Wallace Friesen, demonstrated that certain facial expressions, such as happiness, anger, fear, sadness, surprise, and disgust—are biologically hardwired and recognised across all human cultures.

The theory is grounded in the idea that facial expressions are universal signals of emotional states, shaped by evolutionary processes. Ekman identified six primary emotions (later extended to include contempt) that are expressed through specific, involuntary facial muscle

movements. These facial configurations such as raised eyebrows for surprise or tightened lips for anger are spontaneous and consistent across age, gender, and cultural boundaries. The Facial Action Coding System (FACS), developed by Ekman and Friesen, provides a method of decoding these expressions by categorising facial muscle movements, known as Action Units (AUs), which correspond to emotional states.

Ekman’s theory also includes the concept of microexpressions fleeting, involuntary facial expressions that reveal suppressed or hidden emotions. These brief expressions typically occur in high-stakes interactions and are difficult to control, making them reliable indicators of true emotional states. Importantly, while the expressions themselves are universal, the contexts in which they are expressed or suppressed are culturally conditioned. This cultural framing of emotional expression provides room for semiotic interpretation in specific contexts like Tiv conversation,

where facial expressions are deeply embedded in social norms and practices.

The theory is relevant to this study because it offers a scientifically validated foundation for identifying and interpreting facial expressions as signs within Tiv conversations. It aligns with the semiotic objective of this research by treating facial expressions as structured signs that convey meaning. Moreover, it allows the study to bridge the biological basis of emotion with the cultural specificity of Tiv communicative behaviour.

Empirical Review

Sharkov, Silkin, and Kireeva (2022) examine the communicative meanings of facial expressions in their study titled “Non-verbal Signs of Personality: Communicative Meanings of Facial Expressions.” The aim of the study is to investigate whether nonverbal behaviour particularly facial expressions reflect cultural similarities or differences, and to what extent these expressions convey reliable emotional signals. The

study adopts Ray Birdwhistell’s theory of kinesics, which emphasizes that body motion, including facial expressions, is culturally learned rather than biologically universal. The data was collected through laboratory experiments involving adult participants, focusing on their facial responses to various emotional stimuli such as fun, surprise, and disgust. The findings show that while smiling is highly consistent with amusement, other facial expressions like surprise and disgust appear inconsistently and often only partially. The study concludes that facial expressions cannot be fully explained by universal biological responses and must be interpreted within cultural and situational contexts. The authors recommend that future research should integrate semiotic and cultural approaches to better understand the communicative function of facial behaviour.

Sharkov, Silkin, and Kireeva (2022) is related to the current study hence both seeks to interprets facial expressions

as communicative signs. Both studies acknowledge the cultural embeddedness of nonverbal behaviour and recognise the need for semiotic analysis. However, while their study adopts Birdwhistell's kinesic theory and laboratory data, the current research adopts Paul Ekman's theory of universal facial expressions and focuses specifically on naturalistic facial cues in Tiv interpersonal conversations. The key difference lies in scope and context. Sharkov et al. explore general nonverbal signs across experimental settings, while the current study examines how culturally filtered facial expressions function within everyday Tiv communicative interactions. The gap this study intends to fill is the lack of contextual, culture-specific semiotic analysis of facial expressions among the Tiv people of Nigeria, thereby advancing non-Western perspectives in nonverbal communication research.

Mahesh Goyani (2021) conducted a study on "Nonverbal Communication through Facial Expression in Diverse

Conditions". The aim of the study was to enhance both the recognition accuracy and computational efficiency of facial expression analysis systems. The study introduced a Multi-Level Haar (MLH) feature-based system, which combines local and global appearance-based features to capture fine-grained texture and overall facial structure. The study employed a quantitative experimental method using four publicly available datasets CK, JAFFE, TFEID, and an in-house dataset called WESFED. Various template matching and machine learning classifiers were tested, with the Discriminant Analysis Classifier yielding the highest recognition accuracy. The results demonstrated that the proposed method maintained a high recognition rate across challenging conditions, including low-resolution images, limited training samples, and the presence of noise. The study concludes that computational models can significantly enhance the recognition and interpretation of facial expressions,

providing valuable insights into the automation of nonverbal communication analysis.

While Goyani's study and the current research both focus on facial expressions as a mode of nonverbal communication, the former is rooted in computational modeling, whereas the present study adopts a semiotic-humanistic approach grounded in Paul Ekman's theory. Goyani analyses facial expressions through machine learning, while the current study explores how facial expressions function within Tiv interpersonal conversations. The gap addressed by the current research is the lack of culturally grounded, context-specific semiotic analysis of facial expressions in real-life communication among the Tiv people—something computational models alone cannot fully capture.

Data Presentation and Analysis

FIGURE 1: Smile or Laughter



Source: (field survey, 2025)

The above expression is smile or laughter, which shows joy, friendliness, or polite agreement. According to Ekman (2003), a genuine smile especially one that includes raised cheeks and eye contraction (known as the Duchenne smile) is a universal marker of happiness and social affiliation. In interpersonal Tiv speech, this facial expression often occurs during conversations to signal approval, build rapport, or ease interpersonal tension. It functions not only as an emotional expression but as a pragmatic conversational tool, softening criticism or disarming a tense exchange. For instance,

in everyday speech between peers, a speaker may smile when responding to a serious or provocative comment, subtly communicating agreement, tolerance, or even submission to avoid conflict. In hierarchical conversations such as between a younger speaker and an elder, a smile can nonverbally acknowledge power dynamics and express deference, helping to maintain harmony without breaking verbal fluency. In Tiv speech culture, it may also appear when a speaker uses humor, irony, or sarcasm to reinforce social bonds or mask emotional discomfort. Semiotically, the smile is iconic, its form mirrors its emotional function, serving as a visible image of friendliness, thereby enhancing mutual understanding in face-to-face communication.

FIGURE 2: Nostrils Flaring



Source: (field survey, 2025)

This shows concentration, confusion or displeasure. The deep furrows on the forehead, tightened eyes, and lowered brows reflect intense cognitive effort or disapproval. Based on Ekman theory (2003), Nostrils Flaring decrease psychological closeness and signal seriousness. This face may appear during dispute resolution or when someone evaluates troubling information. Iconically, shows unresolved tension or reflective depth. This could also communicate anger, agitation or readiness. The expanded nostrils, clenched lips, and piercing eyes mark physiological arousal, a precursor to potential action. Ekman and

Friesen (1975) identify this as a preparatory cue in hostile environments. Among Tiv people, nostril flaring is a nonverbal prelude to confrontation and often replaces verbal aggression in respectful environments. Indexically, it marks rising internal pressure and signals defensive readiness.

FIGURE 3: Sudden Jaw Clenching



Source: field survey, 2025

This expression signals pain, suppressed anger, or quiet disappointment. The visible tightening of the jaw and neck muscles, coupled with a fixed or

unblinking gaze, communicates a deliberate effort to withhold emotional reaction during conversation. According to Ekman's (2003) theory of microexpressions, such involuntary movements reveal repressed negative emotions that the speaker chooses not to verbalise. In Tiv interpersonal interactions, this expression often surfaces when an individual especially an elder is offended, disagrees, or feels disrespected, yet chooses to remain composed to preserve social harmony or authority. The facial cue sends a clear message of moral disapproval or inner tension without direct confrontation. As an indexical sign, it points to the speaker's restrained judgment, allowing communication of displeasure through nonverbal control rather than spoken rebuke.

FIGURE 4: Wide opened eyes and mouth



Source: field survey, 2025

According to Ekman (2003), fear is universally identified through involuntary facial features such as eyes stretched wide open, eyebrows raised and drawn together, and the mouth opened slightly or fully. This facial configuration reflects an instinctive response to perceived threat or danger, as the widened eyes help the individual to take in more environmental detail, while the open mouth often signifies a gasp or silent protest. In Tiv interpersonal communication, this expression frequently occurs in real-time conversations, especially when a speaker narrates a traumatic, offensive, or socially

taboo experience. The listener's expression of wide eyes and parted lips communicates not only fear or shock, but also an implicit plea to the speaker to stop, suggesting that the information being shared is disturbing or emotionally overwhelming. Thus, it serves a regulatory function within interaction, discouraging the continuation of a fearful topic. Ekman classifies this as a universal expression of fear, and semiotically, it is iconic, the expression directly resembles the emotional state it represents, such as heightened alertness, discomfort, or helplessness.

FIGURE 5: Disapproval

Source: field survey, 2025

Disapproval is communicated through a cluster of related micro-expressions typically drawn from the anger-disgust-contempt spectrum. This often includes tightened or compressed lips, narrowed eyes, slightly furrowed brows, and sometimes a subtle curling of the upper lip. In daily Tiv conversations, this expression emerges as a nonverbal evaluation tool, especially during interpersonal discussions involving controversial, immoral, or socially inappropriate topics. When a participant in a conversation displays disapproval facially, it is a silent cue to indicate non-

acceptance or rejection of what has just been said—without verbal interruption. It often holds more weight in intergenerational communication, where respect norms may prevent open disagreement, and thus facial disapproval becomes a strategic substitute for spoken criticism. Based on Ekman's theory, the components of this expression fall within universal displays of social disagreement. Semiotically, the expression is indexical—it does not symbolically resemble the disapproval but points to the internal judgment or rejection forming silently within the hearer.

FIGURE 6: Face Down

Source: field survey, 2025

The above expression is face down, which communicates submission, regret, or humility. Ekman (2003) identifies the downward tilt of the head and lowered gaze as nonverbal indicators of sadness, guilt, or emotional retreat. In Tiv speech, this cue often occurs during sensitive interpersonal exchanges, particularly when someone is being corrected by an elder, acknowledging wrongdoing, or expressing remorse. The gesture avoids direct eye contact, which in Tiv custom may be interpreted as a sign of respect or self-restraint. Rather than speaking defensively or apologising overtly, the listener may drop their face in a nonverbal act of acknowledgment, allowing the facial posture to do the work of speech. Semiotically, this is an indexical sign, the gesture points to an internal emotional state (such as guilt, deference, or sorrow), subtly informing the speaker of the listener's emotional stance without verbal confirmation.

FIGURE 7: Turned-Away Face



Source: field survey, 2025

The above expression is turned-away face, which conveys disinterest, rejection, or subtle disapproval. In Ekman's framework, such gestures—where the head turns away from the speaker, often accompanied by tension in the jaw or lack of eye contact, fall under expressions of anger, disgust, or contempt, depending on intensity. Within Tiv interpersonal conversation, turning the face away may occur when someone is offended, disengaged, or silently protesting

a statement. Unlike overt interruptions or verbal disagreement, this cue functions as a silent refusal to continue engagement or to validate the speaker's message. It may also be used strategically when cultural norms of respect prevent open confrontation especially by younger individuals or women in patriarchal dialogue settings. Semiotically, this gesture is also indexical, signaling the listener's psychological withdrawal or emotional distancing from the ongoing interaction.

FIGURE 8: Face Up



Source: field survey, 2025

The above expression is face up, which communicates expectation, reflection, spiritual connection, or even internal questioning. According to Paul Ekman's theory, while this exact pose is not a primary emotional expression, it is a context-dependent nonverbal cue. In Tiv interpersonal communication, looking upward during conversation may indicate a person is searching for an answer, recalling a memory, or resisting immediate verbal response. It is especially meaningful in spiritual or moral discourse, where upward gaze can imply seeking divine

insight, withholding judgment, or even challenging what was just said silently. Semiotically, this posture is indexical, it points toward an internal process, such as deep thought, anticipation, or even emotional detachment, depending on context. In Tiv communal settings, this expression may also serve as a silent pause, asking others to interpret the speaker's internal state without interrupting. It is often used by elders or individuals trying to compose their thoughts before speaking, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues like land, morality, or ancestry.

Discussion of Findings

The study identified 8 common facial expressions in Tiv conversations which include smiles, furrowed brows, and jaw clenching. These cues appeared in various contexts greetings, conflict resolution, and storytelling serving as emotional and conversational signals. Sharkov et al.'s (2022) study supports

these findings when his findings show that facial expressions reflect both individual emotion and culturally specific meaning.

The study also found that these expressions perform clear semiotic and communicative functions. They act as indexes of emotion, icons of intention, and symbols of social meaning. For example, a smile during tension signals peace, while furrowed brows show disapproval without speech. The findings are in line with Birdwhistell (1970), cited in Sharkov et al. (2022) that facial cues are culturally learned and function systematically within interpersonal communication. The findings highlight facial expressions as essential, structured tools in Tiv conversational practice.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that facial expressions serve as structured and culturally embedded nonverbal cues in Tiv interpersonal communication. Expressions such as smiling and jaw clenching are not merely

emotional reactions but function as semiotic tools that convey agreement, disapproval, deference, or resistance without words. These cues operate systematically within Tiv discourse, reflecting both emotional states and social norms. The study affirms Ekman's theory that while facial expressions are universal in form, their use and interpretation are shaped by cultural context, supporting the idea that nonverbal communication is essential to meaning-making in Tiv conversations.

2. Educators and cultural mediators working with Tiv communities should be trained to recognise and interpret facial expressions accurately, as these play a key role in interpersonal respect, emotional regulation, and social cohesion.
3. Future research should expand the scope to include other forms of nonverbal cues such as gesture, posture, and eye movement across different Tiv dialects and age groups, using both qualitative and video-ethnographic methods for richer analysis.

Recommendations

1. Linguists and communication scholars should incorporate nonverbal cues into analyses of African languages, especially in studies of pragmatic and discourse strategies, to capture the full communicative intent.

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