This is a rhetorical study of tempo and rhythm in a speaker's nonverbal communication. Nonverbal tempo and rhythm are sources of understanding as well as misunderstanding in different rhetorical situations. The primary focus of this contribution is to explain how the concept of kairos, meaning a subjective moment in time, can help us to understand tempo and rhythm in our nonverbal communication and how this can relate to a sense of timing. In my research I have found that one of the aspects of our nonverbal communication important for kairos is a sense of rhythm. A speaker with a good sense of rhythm can come across as very persuasive.

Within rhetoric, a wide and complex variety of concepts are used to explore and discuss our society’s different discursive phenomena. When analyzing different bodies of empirical material, like the nonverbal communication of politicians and university teachers, some rhetorical concepts stand out as more important than others, namely ethos, pathos, decorum, and kairos. The concepts aim to clarify and explain nonverbal communicative processes that can seem incomprehensible. One of the concepts I would like to explore here is kairos. The concept of kairos captures a process that can be difficult to comprehend: whereby everything crystallizes into exactly the right moment for someone to act or speak, or both. Sensing this moment is what we in everyday speech often call timing. Exploring the concept of kairos, one finds that its connection to the sense of timing also involves a sense of tempo and rhythm. Following a presentation of kairos, I present of a body of empirical material consisting of lectures by university teachers against which the concept of kairos will be tested.
The Right Action at the Right Time

Kairos is a Greek word that designates the “right moment” in relation to time, place, and action (Sutton 413). The concept of kairos has been employed and further developed within the discipline of rhetoric, as well as within theology and philosophy. Within theology, the concept usually refers to an occasion when God intervenes in history; philosophically, kairos can, for instance, refer to the moment when “truth” is revealed (Karuse 4; Sipiora 114–27).

Kairos is most often used in rhetoric in the following three ways: first through rhetoric, like kairos, requiring decisive and determined action; second, kairos referring to the right moment to speak; and third, its referral to what is appropriate. Kairos is the moment that the speaker awaits, in order to act in harmony with what the situation requires. One such moment can be when consensus is reached in deliberative negotiations. If the ideas are not expressed at the “right moment” the speaker misses kairos, that is to say, fails to live up to the demands imposed by the specific audience and situation. Kairos, in addition to being that which incites the speaker to speak, also constitutes the value of speaking (Sutton 413–17).

Decorum is a concept closely related to kairos. Both contain the idea of doing the “right thing with the right forcefulness/proportions”; that is to say, doing an action considered fitting in a rhetorical situation (Hariman). In rhetoric, a “rhetorical situation” refers to the context within which nonverbal communication takes place (Bitzer). Lloyd F. Bitzer presented a definition of the “rhetorical situation” in the late 1960s. According to Bitzer, the three factors that comprise the foundation of a rhetorical situation are exigence, audience, and constraints. “Exigence” stands for that which can be considered an urgent, pressing need in the situation: something that must be dealt with. Which specific response necessary to satisfy the need, and how it is communicated, is different in each particular situation. “Audience” refers to the listeners or receivers of the rhetorical response. A rhetorical situation requires listeners/receivers open to influence. The rhetorical response should be convincing and it should ideally lead to some form of change, decision, or action among the audience. “Constraints” designates the limiting circumstances within the situation, such as, for example, beliefs, attitudes, facts, instructions, etc. Both concepts—decorum and kairos—are closely connected to the rhetorical situation. However, kairos adds an additional factor, the “right moment,” which is the aspect of the concept that I wish to emphasize in this chapter.

In ancient literature, the concept of kairos describes those instances where someone carries out a suitable action at the “right moment.” In these texts, kairos is related to practical actions, for example throwing an axe. Terms such as aperture, hole, opening, target, point of impact, and the like, are used to describe the exact goal/purpose of the actions performed at the instant of kairos. Onians cites The Suppliants, a drama by Euripides (ca. 480–406 BCE), in which the character Adrastus speaks of men “aiming their bow beyond the kairos.” Kairos refers here to the temple (at the side of the