

Paralanguage in Business Communication : A Language beyond Language

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ABSTRACT

Non-verbal communication complements its verbal counterpart and contributes in a substantial way to business communication. Of all the varied forms, paralanguage happens to be the nearest to verbal communication. Just as we can communicate our attitudes through different body movements, we can also express a lot through different aspects of our voice and significantly enhance our verbal communication when we make a presentation, deliver a speech, participate in a group discussion or appear for an interview. Paralanguage communicates a lot about us. The paper attempts to study the nuances of paralanguage and its significance in business communication.

Key words : Non-verbal communication, Paralanguage, Tone, Inflection, Pitch

I.INTRODUCTION

Non-verbal communication and language form an omni-directional communication together. And the lack of one significantly reduces the effectiveness of communication. According to Stevick (1982:163), “if verbal communication is the pen which spells out details, nonverbal communication provides the surface on which the words are written and against which they must be interpreted.” Birdwhistell (1970) has stated that no more than 30 to 35 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or an interaction is carried by the words. These figures appear to have gained fairly wide acceptance, as a number of authors cite 65 percent as the communicative load carried by the non-verbal channels. Mehrabian and Ferris (1967), however, claim that the face accounts for 55 percent, tone 38 percent while words account for only 7 percent of the total meaning.

The term ‘paralanguage’ was first used by Trager (1958) as a synthesis of the linguistic and psychological material collected on the kinds and categories of voice modification which could be applied to different situational contexts. According to some communication scientists, paralanguage is subsumed under non-verbal communication, as with Duncan (1969), who includes body motion, paralanguage, proxemics, olfaction, skin sensitivity, and use of artifacts under the title of nonverbal communication, while with others, all aspects of nonverbal communication are subsumed under paralanguage. Paralanguage can be kinetic and vocal as well that would include gestures, facial expressions, tone, voice modulation and others. The 1984 ERIC definition of paralanguage is the “study of those aspects of speech communication that do not pertain to linguistic structure or content, for example, vocal qualifiers and intonation” (Houston 1984:185). This definition appears to be gaining popularity at present. In the present paper only paralinguistic features have been studied under the term ‘paralanguage’.

Paralanguage is a form of nonverbal communication by which we mean how a person says something. It involves the “how” of a speaker’s voice rather than the “what” of the words. It literally means “like language” and is the closest to actual verbal communication. Paralanguage is an important component of natural communication and is an essential supplement to verbal communication. Paralanguage assumes even greater significance when used in the business context.

II.DISCUSSION

Paralanguage which is also considered to be a form of non-verbal communication, refers to non-verbal vocal messages. The influence that paralanguage can have on communication is significant as the listeners pay more attention to the way a spoken message is said than to the words themselves and people need to understand that how to say things can be more important than what to say (Knapp, 2009). Paralanguage is non-lexical vocal communication which includes utterances that may have strong signifying traits but no semantic meaning. It includes such things as tone, pitch, voice inflection, volume, etc. Though these paralinguistic features appear to be meaningless on the surface, yet they contribute immensely to the intended meaning of a message delivered in a communication process.

Tone is the physical level at which the sound of the human voice is transmitted. In a general sense, tone is the attitude of the speaker as revealed in the choice of vocabulary or the intonation of speech. Every text or a verbal utterance has a specific tone which is at times perceived unconsciously or at other times taken for granted. Tone in business communication can reveal a lot about the status of the speaker as well as the receiver in an organization. An authoritative tone would obviously mean that it is a process of downward

of communication where an official of higher authority communicates to that of a lower status. On the other hand a submissive tone is used in a process of upward communication.

Pitch is a measure of how high or low a voice is and is mainly determined by the speed of vibration of the vocal cords. Faster rate of vibration produces a higher pitch and a comparatively slower one leads to a lower pitch. The pitch of our voice usually varies depending on the subject of the message or even the mood of the speaker. Monotonous pitch makes communication boring where as varying pitch adds colour and dynamism. It actually lends life to an otherwise boring piece of communication. This becomes particularly evident when a business professional makes a presentation either with the objective of persuading the audience to accept his proposal or informing them about the progress of his work on a certain project. A varying pitch is equally needed in a group discussion, a meeting or any other oral communication in a business set up. It also speaks of the communicator's organisational status. A person speaking in a high pitch is usually supposed to be occupying a higher position in the organisation than the person communicating in a lower pitch.

The pacing or the tempo of speech is as important as the pitch. It refers to the rate at which someone speaks. It is vital to understanding a message and to the credibility of the communicator. Slow and fast rate of speaking imply different meanings. Speaking fast could imply lack of comfort or even nervousness. A speaker who does not feel sure of himself generally feels intimidated by the challenge of speaking in professional situations and so would like to complete the task as soon as possible. This would adversely affect the credibility of the speaker. Similarly too slow a rate can make a communicator sound monotonous and uninteresting. It can reinforce or contradict a verbal message as well. For example, a professional speaking in an excited manner at a very fast rate about his success in sales would confirm his verbal message and its meaning, whereas a salesperson's verbal message when spoken too quickly is greeted with suspicion (Dwyer 2005).

Intensity or volume refers to the loudness or softness of one's voice. It depends on various factors as the type and size of the audience, the communication context, and the acoustic sharpness. In a business set up volume varies with varying situations. For instance, the volume of a communicator's speech is usually high in a meeting where there are a large number of people and is low when he is in a one to one interaction with a colleague. Volume of speech also implies the speaker's hierarchical status. So a subordinate speaking in a loud voice to a higher authority is considered to be discourteous.

Articulation is one of the most important factors of paralanguage. It is the process by which sounds, syllables and words are formed. Articulation and the adequacy of our speech affect our social, emotional, educational and professional status. Be it a candidate appearing for an interview, a participant in a group discussion, a manager addressing a meeting, a salesperson making a presentation, good articulation always evokes a positive response towards the speaker. The other paraverbal features that affect a process of communication are rhythm and quality of speech, use of proper stress and taking timely pause. All these taken together contribute immensely to daily business communication.

III.CONCLUSION

Language and paralanguage are intricately linked and the inadequacy of one would adversely affect the other. Numerous studies have shown the relevance of paraverbal features in a communication process. These features complement the verbal cues and in order to ensure successful business communication and overcome the chances of discontinuous communication or incorrect interpretation the paraverbal features need to match their verbal counterpart. It becomes an essential requisite for business professionals to consciously and appropriately use paralanguage to carry out harmonious communication.

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