

# Paralanguage and its Exceptional Function in Communication

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**Abstract:** *This work focuses on the exceptional role that paralanguage plays in communication. Paralanguage is the non-verbal form of communication that is found in Meta communication. It has the capacity to modify, nuance meaning and confer emotions as in prosody, pitch, intonation, facial expressions, gesticulations etc. Paralanguage functions as the component of communication that contradicts (at times), substitutes and reinforces verbal communication. It is the spoon with which the meal communication is dished. Communication minus paralanguage equals confusion/chao.*

**Keywords:** *gesticulation, intonation, confer, modify, nuance*

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## INTRODUCTION

Communication which is the transmission of information from a person to another or from one party to another will be incomplete without paralanguage. Paralanguage is the non-lexical component of communication. For example: intonation, pitch, speech tempo, hesitation noise, gesture facial expression, silence etc., are not lexical items yet evident in all verbal expressions. Paralanguage is also known as vocalics, a component of meta-communication that may modify meaning, give nuanced meaning, or convey emotions by using techniques such as prosody, pitch, volume, intonation etc. It is sometimes defined as relating to non phonemic properties only. It is the area of nonverbal communication that emphasizes body language and voice nuances (changes) as a means of communicating thoughts and feelings. Paralanguage is a vital part of communication, because, it either confirms or annuls whatever the verbal angle is transmitting. Communication is like a tree stump, paralanguage: the leaves/fruit.

**OBJECTIVE:** This paper aims at amplifying the importance of paralanguage in effective communication. Language + Paralanguage = Communication. Communication - Language (voiced and para) is “fallacy”.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Paralanguage has been defined by various authors in various ways. According to Robbins and Langton (2001), paralanguage is communication that goes beyond specific spoken words. It includes pitch, amplitude, rate, and voice quality of speech. That is to say that spoken words may be accompanied by the voice of disgust, anger, pain, shame, love etc. This writer (Langton) is more interested in the voice of language than any other characteristics in his definition of paralanguage.

In contrast to the singular definition of paralanguage as variations in pitch, Paschalis Chliaras of Independent Science and Technology College, Athens: in his article on Paralanguage posits that paralanguage is not limited to voice variations, it rather extends to the area of nonverbal communication that emphasizes body language. According to him “Various aspects of paralanguage include: posture, eye contact, hand gesture, facial expression and vocal qualities such as volume, tempo, tone of voice fluency, modulation and accent (Researchgate net.).

Some schools of thought believe that paralanguage is a component of nonverbal communication while some believe that any feature of communication that is not language is paralanguage. For the purpose of this work however, paralanguage is inclusive of both stances. It is important to note that communication is incomplete without paralanguage. Lawyers and judges are not only interested in what a complainant/client has to say, they pay keen attention to the nonverbal moves because words may easily be painted but not the reflex embedded in paralanguage.

Understanding communication is important, if one intends to know the roles of paralanguage in communication. I like the definition of communication by Functional Use of English and Communication by Onyekwere Opara et al: “It is the art of conveying information”. The tense in ‘conveying’ indicates that it is continuous; a process. The word ‘art’ also indicates that certain factors are involved in the act.

**Information can be conveyed in two major ways:**

**Verbal Communication And Non-Verbal Communication.**

Pearson *et al.*, (2003:10) considers communication as a process because it is a dynamic activity, an exchange, or a set of behaviours; it is not the product of a static phenomenon. This means that communication goes beyond what is said (verbalized) to behaviours (nonverbal). Paralanguage

is therefore non-verbal communication evident in all verbalized communication.

**Verbal communication:** is the form of communication that involves the use of words. Oral communication is usually a face – to – face interaction among participants while written communication conveys meaning through written texts.

**Non-verbal communication:** consists of paralanguage: body language, actions, posture, dress sense/clothing, eye contact, body distance, smell, gestures, facial expressions and other physical appearances.

Paralanguage is basically about the way we express our words of excitement, depression, anger, frustration etc. during speech(es) using voice variations and body language.

### **EXAMPLES OF PARALANGUAGE**

- i. Intonation: This is tone cadence and modulation of voice in speech. When voice is low in speech, it can be assumed that the speaker is sad or is trying to say a secret or divulge private information.
- ii. Respiration: This is a combination of physical and vocal paralinguistic elements because we can vocalize or add sound to our bodies' natural process of breathing. Gasping generally expresses surprise through vocalized sharp inhalations. Sighs are indicative of dissatisfaction, disgust, tiredness etc.
- iii. Pitch: This is the property of sound that varies in the frequency of vibration. One's pitch can be high or low. High pitches most times display anger, excitement, surprise, rebuke etc.
- iv. Pauses: A pause can be referred to as temporary inactivity, stop, or rest; an intermission of action. A pause amidst a speech can mean different things for example, the speaker is giving the audience time to digest the information, a speaker is weighing some pros and cons, etc.
- v. Tone: This can be comic, sarcastic, joyful official, personal, angry etc. "Stop it there!" "This is no longer funny!" The tone here shows heavy irritation.
- vi. Silence: this is muteness/refusal to speak. This can pass/transmit various meanings to the receiver/audience. It can portray displeasure, consent , contentment depending on the context of situation.

- vii. Facial Expressions: The human face is capable of all manner of articulations and distortions. Each of them can be interpreted in unique ways depending on the situation or context. A smirk, for instance, could convey a sense of dissatisfaction, it could also be a shy response to an embarrassing question. A corked brow could signify surprise or inquisitiveness, some also use it as a means of conveying extreme disapproval.
- viii. Gestures: The positioning of our hands can affect how seriously people take what we say. Crossing arms on chest can be seen as lack of interest or a sign of tiredness or cold. Pointing, on the other hand, can be extremely effective in indicating or emphasizing something.

### **THE IMPACT OF PARALANGUAGE ON COMMUNICATION**

On a general note, paralinguistics has dual impact on communication. One is positive, the other, negative. This paper is particularly concerned with the positive impact of paralinguistics on communication. Paralinguistics is to language what tune/rhythm, is to lyrics. Its absence creates a vacuum that nothing else can fill.

#### **Below are Some of the Major Areas Paralinguistics Affect Communication:**

1. It gives additional meaning to lexical items during conversation. There are times when someone's lexical expressions alone will not be enough to interpret the message being transmitted, paralinguistics does the extra job. "Come here." and "Come here!" are same lexical representation informing the audience to come to a particular place, yet, the voice pitch and tone showcase a clear difference between the two: one is directive, the other is commanding. Thus the decoder has the power to understand an encoder's state of mind besides words, only possible through paralinguistics.
2. It gives additional meaning to communication. When words are followed by facial expressions for instance the message in the said words are easily and better transmitted/received. There are times too, when people do not use words, they hum whine, groan, squeal, grunt and make other noises. They may also roll their eyes, nod, shrug, take a deep breath and you know exactly what they mean, even though they may not have said a word.

3. It creates room for easier communication. For instance, a teacher in the class, may not be understood through words alone. Demonstration with hands, nodding of head etc, makes the transmission of the teacher's message easier for the students/ receiver.
4. Paralanguage is the major language of physically impaired people (especially deaf and dumb). Since they lack the ability to speak, voice things out; they use body language to pass their message. This is effective enough on its own.

The importance of paralanguage in communication is undoubtedly massive yet there are times when it can pose serious problems or cause a breakdown in communication. Examples of such scenarios:

**a. Conflict between Verbal and Nonverbal Signs in Communication**

This is when what is said (Words) are not in consonance with the body language/voice tone. This can lead to a breakdown in communication. Although communication experts are of the opinion that when verbal and non-verbal messages conflict, non-verbal is most likely to be more accurate than verbal. For instance during interaction, one who is alert can detect the anxiety that exists behind the façade of a good humoured, lucky-go-lucky fellow. One can decode the rocky relationship of a married couple despite professions of undying love.

**b. Cultural representation/differences**

Every society has traditions and culture that form their psyche. Knowing that communication can only take place effectively when the encoder and decoder have the same reference for concepts, cultural differences can pose a problem in interpretation of transmitted information. Torn, Tattered, Crazy, Jean Trousers to a sphere can be seen as fashionable but to another could mean that the wearer is mad.

A shriek could mean fear, it can also mean excitement. The challenge this has birthed is; how can one ascertain the meaning of a particular sound/movement especially when the communication is cross-cultural?

Paralanguage is a great asset to communication; it complements words, throws more light on whatever is said, yet can be greatly inhibited by socio-cultural differences which either dampen the meaning or result to confusion.

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