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Paralanguage: The Hidden Meaning of Words

How well do you **listen**? And how well do you **communicate**?

Can you 'read' the **real meaning** behind your spouse, a politician or a customer's voice?

All of us are aware that the meaning of what we say is contained, in part, in the **words** we say, but that **how** we say things also contains powerful messages. The word, "Yes", for example, can have completely different meanings (even in the exact same sentence), depending on **how** it is said.

Reading these hidden messages is sometimes called the '**forensics**' of speech.

The "how" something is said is referred to as paralanguage, which includes **intonation, emphasis, volume**, and so

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on. Specifically, paralanguage can be broken down as follows:

Vocal Changes

There are about six basic ways in which the meaning of words change, depending on how you 'change' your voice:

1. The **tone** of your voice can change the meaning and/or perception significantly. **Increasing loudness or softness** of a syllable, word or sentence in the following sentence will change the problem totally: "I told you that I love you". If, for example, the emphasis is on '**you**' a different meaning is communicated as compared to when the emphasis is on '**love**'.
2. A second set of changes involves raised or lowered **pitch**, which can convey meaning like fear, anxiety or tenseness, or designate a question. If we use the above example again, you can imagine how the perception will change when it is said in a high-pitched or **low-pitched** voice. With tone, this highly emotional sentence can become totally unbelievable!
3. **Volume** of speaking alone can change perception and meaning. Expressing the same sentence with a loud voice or a soft one could alter the meaning and reaction totally. Try shouting at the **top of your voice** to your kid: "Go and do your homework", then use the same sentence in a hardly audible voice. Perhaps you can do the experiment at home and note the different effects.

Emotion and aggression is often associated with volume. Imagine volume of voices when soldiers charge into battle or when you visit a disco. What do people do under those extreme decibels? It seems that volume even impacts on **rationality**. Studies on productivity has shown that a person doing mathematical problem solving performs better the **quieter the room**.

4. Then there's **clipping** and 'drawing out'. Imagine the word 'love' in the above sentence being 'clipped' (luv!) or drawn out (looove). Clipping expressions or words could be due to the speaker not speaking in his/her home language, but it could also convey meanings of **aggression**, sarcasm or even **boredom**. Imagine a representative of Cuba speak in the UN and say: "The

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rebels are supported by their capitalist cronies”. Depending on emphasis, tone and clipping, it could invoke a totally **different reaction** by different countries.

5. Emphasis on **explosive consonants** or **vowels** in sentences also seems to contribute to differences in meaning. Emphasis on the ‘t, p, b, k, d’ letters seem to be perceived as more **aggressive** than when the emphasis is placed on vowels (‘a, e, i, o, u’). Emphases on vowels often come across more **relaxed** and less aggressive. Imagine you say: “Let’s meet at ten o’clock”, with emphasis on all the t-sounds and the ck-sound. Now repeat the same sentence placing the emphasis on the e, a and o-sounds.

6. Finally, **tempo** can be increased or decreased. Speaking quickly tends to communicate urgency or a high emotional state. Slow tempos often give the impression of uncertainty.

Silence

Silence between words and sentences could have important meanings. The **duration** of the silence could also add or change the meaning. Silence is charged with those words that have just been exchanged; words that have been exchanged in the past or words that have not and will not be said, but are **implied**.

Imagine you say to your spouse: “I love you”, and he/she **responds with silence**. That could perhaps mean that your statement is not believed at all. If he/she turns it into a **question**: “Do you love me?” and the response is **silence** it could imply serious disagreement.

If you tell a customer: “The service will cost you R1500”, and your announcement is met by **silence**, it could mean: “I disagree, I’m not going to pay for this!”

The meaning of silence, like the meaning of words, can only be deduced after careful analysis of the communicator, the subject being discussed, the time, place, and culture of the speaker. One thing is sure. It could communicate **important information**.

Association of Ideas

Words can seldom be interpreted alone. They are almost always conveyed in **combination** with other words. One thought in your mind will classically lead to the next, for example: It’s my spouse’s **birthday** tomorrow » I must get him/her a **present** » I do not have any **money** in my bank account » I’ll have to use my **credit card**, etc.

The question is often: why is an idea associated with a previous idea, for example: “I am not in the market for a **new car**, my **wife complains** that it is too small, but we do not have **enough money** anyway”. What is this customer actually telling you? Why does he follow the thought of new car with ‘wife’ and then with ‘money’? What is the

connection? Could it be that his wife wants a new car and that he will actually buy one if it **fits into his budget**?

Emotional Connections

This category of paralanguage represents another example where what one says can be influenced by how it is said. Examples of vocal differentiators are crying, laughing and breaking, where breaking refers to speaking in a broken or halting manner. Clearly a phrase uttered by a crying person will mean something different than once said by a laughing person.

Vocal 'fillers'

These refer to the **small sounds** we make that are not necessarily words per se, but have meaning. For example, ah-hah, un-huh, and huh-uh. They are often used to 'fill the silence with sound' but do not have **dictionary meaning**.

All of these non-verbal (but tied to the voice) characteristics strongly affect how the other person interprets something, and how we interpret their words. They provide an additional context, and a very important one.

Imagine you saying to your customer: "Well, eh-hh, the price is, eh-hh, R120 000". The meaning becomes different when the salesperson talks fluently and without hesitation.

Conclusion

We need to understand that how we say things can be more important than what we say. Detail communication training could be vital for negotiators, mediators, sellers, buyers, call centre staff or anyone dealing with the public. By developing listening skills you can uncover a vast amount of information that can help you communicate and persuade others better.

The above only covers some aspects in a huge body of material being researched in the area of paralanguage.

Manie Spoelstra

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