



आईएफटीएम विश्वविद्यालय, मुरादाबाद, उत्तर प्रदेश
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Content Creator Name: Dr. Arkja Singh

PARALANGUAGE

Many of the readers might have come across this word for the very first time and might even wonder about what Paralanguage is. So let us first define Paralanguage.

“The ways in which people show what they mean other than by the words they use, for example by their tone of voice, or by making sounds with the breath”, is the definition of paralanguage from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus.

“The optional vocal effects (such as tone of voice) that accompany or modify the phonemes of an utterance and that may communicate meaning”, is how paralanguage is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

In simpler words, Paralanguage is *“the way in which we say words”*: volume, pitch, speaking rate, voice quality. So, can it be stated that every part of the speech, whatever anyone is saying is paralanguage? But then, it is not really the verbal part of the speech. On that note, let us make it clear in the beginning only that what is being discussed here is a segment of communication, which in itself is divided into two main types, namely Verbal and Non-verbal communication. So, Paralanguage is that non-verbal part of communication, which accompanies verbal communication in its very closest form. It is somewhat impossible to utter even a single word or a single sentence without using paralanguage because that is what completes the communication. One cannot be expressionless; one cannot really speak without having any voice modulation. There has to be some variation in any set of words being spoken. Those ups and downs during a conversation, like the heartbeat displayed in Electrocardiogram which shows that a person is alive, is paralanguage. Summing it all up, the non-verbal aspect of verbal communication is what can be termed as Paralanguage.

Let's take the example of an office scenario, where a co-worker, Anita, confronts the other, Roger, regarding a memo she received from him. Anita demands to know as to why would Roger be yelling at her as the Memo he sent was written in ALL CAPS....!!!

This depicts that whatever the content was in that memo became secondary the moment Roger, by accident or by intention, decided to write it in capital letters. As those capital letters in a way made it look like he was rather shouting at Anita and not really conveying a message or an important piece of information.

To make it even clearer, take a walk down the memory lane, to the good old childhood days, when reading comics used to be a loved activity, the likes of Archie's, Mandrake, Phantom, or any other. There used to be some really graphic scenes where there was a fight scene among the protagonist and some bad guys maybe, with that "POW", "THUD", and many elaborate "DHISHOOM"s. Why were they depicted in those huge colourful capital letters? Because the comic script writer wanted the readers to understand the huge impact of all those knuckled punches and how hard they must have hit.

This all signifies that it all is much less about 'what' is being said, rather much more about "how" you said it...

Components of Paralanguage:

1. Quality of Voice

a. Tone

It is mostly the expression of the speaker's feelings or thoughts, towards the person in conversation with. It is very much connected to the attitude of the speaker towards the listener at the very moment of a particular conversation, which is most of the time easily reflected in the tone of the speaker. For example, whenever in conversation with a person of liking, one would obviously be friendlier and more congenial. Whereas, in case the very same conversation happens to be with a person one is not very fond of, it might result in irritation and as a result one may sound airy and rude even.

Another example could be of a mother persistently calling out her kid's name without receiving any response. And finally one change in the tone of her voice to a more threatening and bossy note results in an immediate reaction and maybe even an immediate action too. Most of the readers might have personally experienced the same, at some or the other point of time in their childhood years.

b. Volume

It is the loudness of voice. Volume may be varied as per the number of people being addressed at a time. While talking to a person sitting just next to the speaker, one may speak in a very low volume or may even whisper, whereas while addressing a crowd the volume of the voice will obviously have to be louder. Volume may also vary as per our surrounding environment or social

settings. Talking much louder in a disco or even shouting to talk to the person just next to the speaker maybe imperative. On the contrary, while attending a not-so-welcome but an all the more important phone call during a board meeting, one might again have to whisper a few quick responses.

c. Pitch

It is the highness or lowness of a tone as perceived by the ear, based on the frequency of sound waves produced by the vocal chords, which is very much associated with musical melodies. It is that part of the Voice Quality which is very much related to the emotional state of the speaker. Say, for example, during an argument, the pitch is bound to scale up. The more husky will it be or more of a shriek will it be, depends a lot on the emotional state of the speaker.

2. Speed

The pace or rate of a speech is what can be termed as speed. How quick or how slow the spoken words are delivered is speed. For example, if a person is on a call and receives another waiting call which is more important or urgent in nature, the person would quickly wind up the current call to attend the waiting call. In doing so, the rate at which the speaker is uttering the words will increase to a much quicker pace than normal. For the speaker, in general though, it is important to keep the speed just right. As too slow delivery would disengage the listener while too fast delivery may not be able to hit home with the listener either.

3. Pronunciation

It is much about the knowledge of Phonetics. Phonetics is about how to pronounce a particular alphabet or a syllable. Let us take the example of this epic Bollywood comedy "*Chupke Chupke*", where the famous movie star "*Dharmendra*", expresses his dilemma of confusion in English language and thus questioning why the words 'go', 'to', 'no', 'do', 'so', etc. do not all have the same pronunciation. It needs to be understood that the combination of certain alphabets changes the whole way of pronouncing a word. And then there is this variation in US and UK English where we may have different spellings and even different pronunciations of the same word. For example: Education, Mentor, Situation, Schedule, etc.

4. Accent

It is much about the speaker's cultural and geographical background. The place where one is born and brought up affects a person's accent. The distinctive manner of

pronouncing a language is easily indicative of the speaker's particular country, area, or even social class. Here a comparison can be made among the accents of movies made in UK like the "Harry Potter Series" versus those made in USA like the "Avengers Series". Both are English language based movies but one can easily differentiate in their accents. The US accent is more of a drawl and not very good with grammar, while the UK accent is more sharp and clear. Same goes in India, where within the same country one can easily notice the variation in speaking Hindi even, only due to the dialectal variations. This variation can also be termed as the Mother-Tongue Effect, where it can be said that it is really not an easy task for a person to uproot themselves from their very culture.

5. Stress

It can also be termed as Intonation. This is where we focus on any specific word within a sentence which changes the whole meaning of that sentence. For example, reading the given sentence stressing on a different word each time, changes the meaning every time.

This is my Phone.

- The focus here is on that 'particular' phone, maybe among many other phones.

This is *my* Phone.

- Here the focus shifts on the 'belongingness' of the phone to the speaker and not any other.

This is my *Phone*.

- While here the focus further shifts to the 'object' itself, it being a phone and not a pen or key ring.

6. Pause

It means giving a break, in between, while speaking. On that note, for any speaker, it is not actually possible to keep speaking at a stretch without any pause or break. Technically, it is related to Punctuation marks, the commas, the periods, etc. Sometimes the speaker also buys time in this way to organize their thoughts, or to remember what they need to speak next.

Practically, a more apt use of pause can be observed by various impressive public speakers, which may include certain influential political leaders like the charismatic Sushma Swaraj on one hand and a whole gamut of trending stand-up comedians on the other like Kapil Sharma. They know exactly where to create a dramatic pause to

gain the attention of the audience involved, and throw in their punch lines right there to create the maximum impact.

7. Silence

It is the absence of communication. As the famous saying goes “Silence speaks louder than words”. Undoubtedly, it is true. It is a very important yet not frequently used mode of communication. But never the less, it earns the position of being the most impactful of them all. Try and remember that one person who would go on a silent mode now and then, to express disagreement, or shock, or anger, or maybe some other emotion. Thus, making the other people realise intentionally or even unintentionally that there is something fishy going on. Or one can even recall the famous ‘Silent Treatment’ given by every mother to their child, to express their distaste or anger which is beyond explanation or one can say has crossed their threshold of tolerance.

Use of Paralanguage:

Having discussed all that, it comes down to how much do people really use it? The answer is, ALWAYS, every waking moment of life, expression and even non-expression of thoughts, feelings and emotions. Whenever there is a conversation going on and even not going on, it is just not possible to not be using it. According to O’Neill, up to 70% of face to face communication is done through Paralanguage. One might not realise that even all those monosyllables used in our everyday conversations like ‘uh?’, ‘oh!’, ‘umm..’, ‘err...’, etc. are all a part of paralanguage.

From the listener’s perspective, it is interesting to know that a listener barely pays 7% of attention to the actual words being uttered, while 55% is the body language, and a good 38% of the weightage is given to Paralanguage.

So, we speak Paralanguage when we gasp, sigh, clear our throats, change our tone, whisper or shout, emphasize certain words, wave our hands, frown or smile, laugh or cry, string vocal identifiers like uh-huh and ah-hah between our words, or speak faster or slower.