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**The Linguistic Functions of Some Nonverbal  
Communication Features Operating as the Sub-plane of  
Language Use**

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**Abstract**

*This paper highlights the linguistic concerns of the rhetorical “polylogic” approach to the exploration of the stylistic aspects of language, which include paralinguistic communication devices, such as waving of hands, blinking of eyes, etc. These paralinguistic elements (proxemics for example) usually occur together with language in situational discourse in order to*

*create linguistic style and meaning. This therefore describes “human social life and language behaviour as system and structure on all levels of analysis, both linguistic and semiotic” (Ventola, 1988). They are the external features of a discourse which affect the linguistic choices of what the language user makes. These are influenced or determined by nature of the audience, the medium and purposes of communication.*

### **Introduction**

Human beings communicate in a variety of ways. They think of communication generally in terms of the use of words and sentences, but this is not the only way in which human beings communicate. The nonverbal communication refers to all types of communication that do not rely in words or other linguistic system. It includes sound which is a very important aspect of nonverbal communication. It also means (messages expressed by nonlinguistic means). These nonlinguistic messages are important because what we do often conveys more meaning than what we say; ‘People don’t always say what they mean ... but their body gestures and movements tell the truth’.

Nonverbal communication can be so powerful. At first glance, it seems as if meanings come from words but nonverbal communication accounts for much of the meaning in any interpersonal interaction. By tuning into their facial expressions, postures, gestures, and other behaviour you probably can make assumptions about the way the communicators feel about one another at that moment and get some ideas about the nature of their relationship.

### **Brief Historical Facts**

The systematic and scientific study of nonverbal communication dated back at the time of Charles Darwin, in his book titled “The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal” (Pease and Pease, 2004). They further aver that every mammal reliably exhibits certain emotions in their face. However, the publication that book spark off an unprecedented research works on the types, effects and expressions of unspoken communication and behaviour. In as much as these signals or signs are usually so elliptical or rather subtle and that the users are consciously aware of them, studies have discovered a number of different types of nonverbal communication. Researches have broadened the horizon of nonverbal by foraging into a number of fields, such as, linguistics, semiotics and social psychology. An Anthropologist named Ray Birdwhistell initiated the first original study of nonverbal

communication, which he called *kinestcs*. He came up with the fact that the average user of a language speaks words for a total number of about ten or eleven minutes a day, and also that an average sentence takes up to 2.5 seconds. More so, he continues by estimating that nonverbal communicator can make and recognise about 250,000 facial expressions (Pease and Pease, 2004).

### **Features of Nonverbal communication**

Many types nonverbal communication share some characteristics with each other. Although some kinds of nonverbal behaviour are more obvious or intentional than others like waving to say goodbye, or kissing someone to indicate liking, we often communicate nonverbally without even realizing it. We do this by choosing what we wear, the kind of car we drive, the cosmetics and perfume we use, or how we arrange out homes and apartments. We even communicate something by the gifts we select for others.

### **Contextual Communication**

Context includes the physical environment - a bar, a funeral home etc., the nature of a relationship - a stranger, a former intimate partner, the culture or ethnic heritage of the communicators - what are the rules for nonverbal behaviour assumed and used in that particular cultural context? or a host of other contextual factors - the political, historical or economic issues of a situation. If you wink at a person in one context it might signal interest or liking; in another, it might indicate you are telling a lie.

### **All Behaviour has Communicative Value.**

No matter what we do, we send out messages that say something about ourselves and our relationships with others. If one observes you sitting forward or reclining back, tense or relaxed, your eyes wide open or closed, what message would the person get. Even people with expressionless faces communicate something.

### **Communication is Primarily Relational.**

Some nonverbal messages serve utilitarian functions. For example, a police officer directs the flow of traffic, or a team of traffic wardens uses hand motions to coordinate their work. Nonverbal communication serves in more common and more interesting series of social functions. Along with identity management, nonverbal communication allows us to define the kind of

relationship we want to have with others. You could wave, shake hands, nod, smile, pat the other person on the back, give a hug or avoid all contact. Each of these sends a message about the nature of your relationship with the other person. These nonverbal messages convey emotions that we may be unwilling or unable to express, or ones we may not even be aware of.

As technology develops, it makes communication richer and understanding more enhanced. For example, e-mail correspondents have developed a series of symbols called emotions or smileys - that can be created using keyboard characters to simulate nonverbal dimensions of a message. More computer users are able to see one another as they communicate so it is now possible to convey a rich array of emotional messages online.

### **Messages are more Believable than Verbal Messages.**

Action speaks louder than words. This principle applies to nonverbal communication too. For example, we often look for non verbal 'leakage' cues, those behaviour that we think are signs that someone is lying, such as longer pauses before answering a question, reduced eye contact, reduced smiling, slower speech or unfilled pauses

### **Communication is Important in Interpersonal Relationships.**

In so many ways, nonverbal behaviour are central to interpersonal relationships. One can communicate ones power in a relationship by purchasing more expensive gifts or by trying not to be late for a date or meeting. Ones nonverbal behaviour is guided by the rules in the relationship. For example, a private gesture could be used to indicate a loving message. It could be smiles, eye contact, intimate touch or simply leaning toward another. Silence or distance is nonverbal cues which could indicate ones intention to end a relationship.

Finally, most of the first impressions others have of us and we have of others are based on nonverbal cues, sometimes exclusively. Our appearance, smile, hairstyle, clothing, body type, posture and artifacts we carry or surround ourselves with communicate a great deal about our interests, desires and world views

### **Communication is influenced by Culture.**

Cultures have different nonverbal languages as well as verbal ones, and some gestures vary from one culture to another. Nodding the head up and down is an accepted way of saying 'yes' in most cultures. Likewise, a side-to-side

head shake is a nonverbal way of saying 'no' and a shrug of the shoulders is commonly understood as meaning 'I don't know' or 'I'm not sure'.

Communicators become more tolerant of others once they understand that unusual nonverbal behaviour are the result of cultural differences. The way one culture greets may be the way another culture insults. You may have encountered people from a culture other than your own and probably experienced some misunderstanding based on different culturally specific rules for communicating nonverbally. Man-to-man hand-holding has a homosexual connotation in America. In the Arab world, this gesture is a sign of solidarity and kinship between men. While nonverbal expressions may be universal, the way they are used varies widely around the world. It is important to note that the culture in which people live is far more important than their nationality or ethnicity.

### **Communication is Ambiguous.**

Most nonverbal behaviour has the potential to be even more ambiguous than verbal statements. For instance, 'That nose piercing really makes you stand out.' This could be a compliment or a criticism. To understand why, consider how you would interpret silence from your companion during an evening together. Think of all the possible meanings of these nonverbal behaviour: anger, boredom, pre-occupation, nervousness, thoughtfulness - the possibilities are many.

### **Types of Nonverbal Communication**

#### **Face and Eyes**

It's hard to describe the number and kinds of expressions commonly produced by the face and eyes. The study of how the eyes can communicate is sometimes known as oculosics. Gazes and glances are usually signals of the looker's interest. However, the type of interest can vary. The eyes are especially expressive in conveying fear and surprise. When in a hurry and can't stop to talk, you may simply opt for the 'eyebrow flash' - a common sign of recognition that involves a look, a smile, a raising of the eyebrows, and a nod. It may be used to acknowledge the other without committing yourself to conversation. Liles states (1975) that:

Of more interest to us are the facial expressions and various body movements which people use in place of language or along with it. Many of these are involuntary and are apparently

instructive since they are found among people all over the world. Certain facial expressions clearly indicate fright, pain, boredom, ecstasy, and a few other emotions. Even a visitor from a radically different culture would not need an interpreter to explain these expressions.

### **Body Movement/Gestures**

Another way we communicate nonverbally is through the physical movement of our bodies: our postures, gestures, physical orientation to others and so on. The Study is called kinesics. When you encounter someone from another culture and do not speak his or her language, you rely on gestures to help you communicate. Gestures are a fundamental element of communication - so fundamental, in fact, that people who have been blind from birth use them. A group of ambiguous gestures consists of what we usually call fidgeting - movements in which one part of the body grooms, massages, rubs, holds, pinches, picks, or otherwise manipulates another part. These behaviours are called manipulators. An increased use of manipulators is often a sign of discomfort.

The commonest are the so-called emblems or quotable gestures. These types of gestures are conventional and culture-specific which can represent some words, such as the hand wave used in western cultures for "hello" and "goodbye." In different cultural environments, an emblematic gesture can transmit a very different significance, ranging from complimentary to a highly strong language (Navarro, 2008).

The amount and type of gesturing a person uses can be a measure of power and status. People who gesture more are rated as being in positions of power, whereas those who gesture less are judged as being subordinate. Head lowering is generally perceived as a submissive gesture and head raising as a dominant gesture. A student nods more when talking with a professor than with another student. Pointing is judged by observers as one indicator of power, since it implies at least some ability to order people around. Emblems are a type of gesture that can take the place of a word or phrase, and often have a direct verbal translation. They are known as 'speech independent' gestures. For example, the hitchhiking U.S. emblem - arm extended with a closed fist and the thumb extended upwards, or 'you're dead' - using hand or finger to slit throat or 'he's nuts' - using circular finger motion next to ones head. Generally, emblems are known by most or all of a group, class, culture or co-culture. Illustrators are arm or hand movement. They may accompany

speech. You can simply tell one without talking ‘goodbye, stop or get yourself up the stairs this instant’, using your hand. Regulators help us interact effectively in interpersonal interactions. We can use it to tell others to hurry up, continue, elaborate or conclude what they are saying. They are gestures or facial expressions that are used to control or regulate the flow of a conversation. It could be raising of eyebrows, leaning slightly forward, raising a finger or shifting our eye contact. We use facial expression to display how we feel. We also do this by our posture or walk. A big ‘F’ on your test paper could make you look confused or depressed. But if it is a big ‘A’ you might automatically smile. It also shows the intensity of your emotion. You can use your posture to indicate that you are uninterested in someone who is looking at you.

### **Touching in Communication (Haptics)**

The way you touch someone communicates a message. This is called haptics or touch communication. If you pat your friend lightly on the shoulder, you are clearly communicating something different from if you hit him in the face with a tightly closed fist. Touch is important for our health and well being. No other nonverbal form of communicating has the same potential to communicate love, warmth, and intimacy, or to inflict harm or injury. You might kiss, embrace, hug, tap, pat, caress, nibble, hit, kick, bite, punch, grab, shove, etc. All types of touch are not created equal.

Licking, holding and scratching oneself in order to transmit information are forms of nonverbal communication (Knapp and Hall, 2007). These nonverbal behaviours in communication is called “adapters” or “tells”, which can send information that can reveal the intentions or feelings of a communicator and a listener. Moreover, the information transmitted through touching is dependent upon the cultural environment, the context of the situation, the relationship between communications and the manner of touch (Knapp and Hall, 2007).

### **(Paralanguage) Voice**

The study of the way we use our voice and vocal qualities to communicate nonverbally is known as vocalics. We call the vocal, but nonverbal dimensions of our speech, such as the pitch, volume, pronunciation, tone of our voice paralanguage. Along with tone, speed, pitch, volume, and emphasis, paralanguage includes length of pauses and disfluences such as stammering, the use of ‘uh’, ‘um’ ‘er’, pausing, hesitations. In addition,

according to Chike-Okoli (2000), it equally includes feelings, attitudes and information which are not said. He further states that information in paralanguage is conveyed by the tone of voice if the speaker and his countenance rather than any specific word used. All these can reinforce or contradict the messages that words convey. Our voices often give us away when we're trying to create an impression different from our actual feeling. When a speaker shouts 'I am not angry', listeners tend to judge the speaker's intention from the paralanguage, not the words. One's voice may squeak after trying to sound calm and serene, putting the right smile when he's really seething with inner nervousness.

### **Distance**

The study of the way we use space to communicate is *proxemics*. It comes from the word proximity, which means the distance between people or things. Our use of space and the way we create and protect our own spaces - our territories, private spaces and environments communicate volumes to others. Distance is the gap maintained between people of various classes. It can suggest that individual or group is not wanted or that the source wants to avoid a particular situation (Chike-Okoli, 2000)

- **Types of distance**

**Intimate distance:** is usually used with people who are emotionally close to us, and 'then mostly in private situations - caressing or comforting. By allowing people to move into our intimate distance, we let them enter our personal space. When we let them in voluntarily, it's usually a sign of trust.

**Personal distance:** is mostly used in casual conversation. Personal distance allows you to touch another if you extend an arm or reach for them but does not allow for close contact.

**Social distance:** is used during job interviews or cocktail parties. It is for professional and distanced relationships. Space can be a subtle but powerful communicator.

**Public distance:** when you invade someone's personal space, you'll notice the reaction. Public distance allows you to protect yourself from others in a public context. You might cough, scratch or even sneeze to discourage the antisocial behaviour.

### **Territoriality**

Territory refers to the space we often nonverbally claim ownership of, even when we are not present in that space. For instance, at the library table where we put books or bags, when we go out temporarily, we expect that no one should sit there. You can also write 'Do not enter' on your bedroom door or delineate your study area with a desk and chair. In so many ways we use nonverbal cues to project and mark' our territories, an extension of our personal space. This involves status. The higher our status, the more personal space we tend to have and the more we can invade others' personal space.

### **Time**

Interpreting messages associated with time is called *chronemics*. Time is related to status. The boss often determines what time his employees must arrive at work, when they can take a break and how long they should go on vacation. 'Important' people are seen by appointment. Low-status people must never make more important people wait. Important people are often whisked to the head of a restaurant or airport line, while presumably less exalted ones are forced to wait their turn

The use of time depends greatly on culture. In some cultures, punctuality is critically important, while in others it is badly considered. One of the best methods for indicating intimacy and commitment in a relationship is by simply spending more time with one another.

### **Physical Attractiveness**

This alone can be a powerful message. Each culture defines its own particular images of beauty, but there are some underlying aspects of body types and proportional arrangements that appear to be fairly universal across cultures, such as women who are perceived as attractive have more dates and can persuade males with greater ease.

### **Clothing**

Clothing is a means of nonverbal communication. Clothing has been recognized as a way to communicate social status, group identification and personality. Your choices of dress, adornment, artifacts and appearance communicate a lot about your interests, choices, lifestyle, personality and moods Assumptions are made about people based on their style of clothing For example, Moslem women see their veils as helping them define their Moslem identity, resist sexual objectification, and afford more respect.

It remains one the most common forms of nonverbal communication. Its study and other similar objects as a means of nonverbal communication is known to called “*artifacts*” (Yammiyava et al, 2008) or “*objectics*” (Oklahoma Panhandle University, 2012).

### **Physical Environment**

Architecture, physical settings, interior design, noise level and room arrangement communicate something about the people who create such environments There are some houses in which it seems impossible to relax, no matter how friendly the hosts; where the spotless ashtrays, furniture coverings, and plastic lamp covers send nonverbal messages telling the visitors not to touch anything and not to be comfortable. Knapp and Hall (2007) call it ‘un-living rooms’. An environment can communicate the kind of interaction that takes place in it.

### **Functions of Non-Verbal Communication**

#### **Creating and Maintaining Relationships**

Communication is our primary means for beginning, maintaining and ending relationships Nonverbal behaviour plays an important role during every relational stage. When we first meet another person, we observe his or her nonverbal cues like facial expression, eye contact, posture, gesture and tone of voice, to know if he or she is interested in you or to get to know the person better. At the same time we are sizing up others, we are providing nonverbal cues about our attitude towards them. We rarely share these thoughts and feelings overtly. It is important to remember .that nonverbal cues are ambiguous, and that you may misinterpret them.

#### **Regulating Interaction**

Nonverbal regulators are cues that help control verbal interaction. These are:

- i. Changes in vocal intonation - a rising or falling in pitch at the end of a clause
- ii. A drawl on the last syllable or (he stressed syllable in a clause.
- iii. A chop in a vocal pitch or loudness when speaking a common expression such as ‘you know’.

Eye contact is another way of regulating verbal communication. When a speaker seeks a response, he or she signals by looking at the listener who

looks more at the speaker than the reverse. He may respond with a nod or other reactions, after which the speaker looks away and continues speaking.

### **Influencing Others**

How we look, act and sound can be more important in meeting our goals than the words we speak. Sometimes deliberately and sometimes without thought, we use nonverbal behaviour in ways that get others to satisfy our wants and needs.

### **Concealing/Deceiving**

The majority of messages we exchange are not completely truthful. You may pretend to have a good time at a party or celebration even though you are bored. Likewise, you might act graciously when socializing with someone you'd rather never see again. In situations like these and many others, it's easy to see how nonverbal factors can make the face-saving deception either succeed or fail.

People whose jobs require them to act differently than they feel, such as actors, lawyers, diplomats and salespeople, are more successful at deception than the general population.

### **Managing Identity**

In many cases, nonverbal cues can be more important than verbal messages in creating impressions. For instance, when you meet a stranger you would like to know better, instead of projecting your image verbally e.g. 'Hi, I'm attractive, friendly and easy going'; you behave in ways that will present this identity. You might dress fashionably, smile a lot, and perhaps try to strike a relaxed pose.

There are several ways of managing identity nonverbally. It could be how we deliberately stand and move, control facial expressions and the adjustments we make in our voice. You may stand tall and walk proudly when meeting others, make direct eye contact and use a firm but friendly handshake, dress and wish to be remembered, that makes you feel comfortable and confident. The use of personal belongings, such as vehicles and even the place we live. In fact, the physical items we surround ourselves with.

### **Significance**

Nonverbal communication, as held by most social psychologists, accounts for about the two-third of all communication between people or between one

speaker and a group of listeners (Hogan and Stubbs, 2003). It can portray a message both verbally and with correct body signals. "There are numerous elements of what we call body language. They include physical features, both changeable and unchangeable, your gestures and signals you communicate with others" (Hogan and Stubbs, 2003).

When the other person or group is absorbing the message, they are focused on the entire environment around them, meaning, the other person uses all five senses in the interaction. "Sight makes up 83% of the impact on the brain of information from the senses during a visual presentation. Taste makes up 1%, hearing makes up 11%, smell 3% and 2%." (Pease and Pease, 2004)

### **Conclusion**

Nonverbal communication consists of messages expressed by nonlinguistic means. It is pervasive; in fact, nonverbal messages are always available as a source of information about others. Most nonverbal behaviour suggests messages about relational attitudes and feelings, in contrast to verbal statements, which are better suited to expressing ideas. Messages that are communicated nonverbally are usually more ambiguous than verbal communication.

Nonverbal communication serves many functions. It can help in the creating and maintaining of relationships. Nonverbal communication also serves to regulate interaction and to influence others. Nonverbal communication can be used as a tool to enhance the success of deceptive verbal messages. Finally, we use nonverbal cues to manage our identity and impressions with others.

The messages it transmits can be communicated in a variety of ways: Through the use of face and eyes, body movement, touch, voice, distance, territory, time, physical, appearance, clothing, and environment. Culture plays a significant role in determining the rules and meanings for each of these factors.

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