

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication in Business Activities

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Abstract

When discussing business communication, authors usually approach it from a linguistic, psychological, psycholinguistic or an economic/business perspective. We would like to add another perspective, i.e. communication management. Therefore, this paper consists of three parts. The first one refers to verbal communication and conversation management (i.e., conversational management strategies), the second one deals with nonverbal communication and the last one describes an experiment that is to be conducted for understanding and improving effective communication in a business environment.

Key words: verbal communication, nonverbal communication, business English, conversation management

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1. Introduction

Since communication is an inherent element in a wide array of environments, which nowadays has been profoundly marked by technological progress (Buzarna-Tihenea, 2019, p. 140), it has been studied by many linguists and psycholinguists (including the field of business communication). Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (1990) considers that psycholinguistics is mainly aimed at tackling the modifications incurred in messages during the actual communication process, triggered by the relationships, the interconnections that are established between the message sender and its recipient, with all the involved elements, such as reciprocal influence, psychic lability, impact of the overall context where it is situated. In this scholar’s opinion, psycholinguistics should focus particularly on the analysis of language facts in terms of living reality, and on the interconnections waved between these speech facts and the contexts where the subjects find themselves (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1991).

2. Theoretical background

Communication, including business communication, has been studied by linguists and psycholinguists. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (1999) considers as the object of psycholinguistics the study of the changes that appear in the message during the concrete act of communication, due to the relationships that are established between the sender and the receiver, with all what they assume, such as psychic lability, mutual influence, influences of the general context in which it is located. Psycholinguistics must study the facts of language as a living reality, the relationships between these speech facts and the situations in which the subjects find themselves (T. Slama-Cazacu, 1991).

The study of the oral language by linguists with the help of the recording technique led to the creation of some valuable corpora of conversation that indicate the existence, importance and main characteristics of the dialogue. We owe the first extensive research on dialogue in the Romanian language, as well as the systematization of data on dialogue, to Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (1999). Dialogue is a form of communication signaled by the real and active presence of at least two partners, who have, alternatively, the role of speaker and receiver/ auditor and who transmit information through the verbal and nonverbal components of communication.

The dialogue is based on the fact that each of the partners is focused on what information they are going to convey, on the interest shown in what the interlocutor is saying, on the adaptation of each partner to the possibilities of understanding of the partner, on the alternative exchange of replies, the proportional dosing of their length so as not to degenerate into a monologue.

The dialogue implies the strict observance of some rules: adapting to the partner and to the known common context, the intention to communicate, listening to the partner's replies, inhibiting one's own reply, mastering affectivity, promptness of the reply, short-term memory, alternating and chained speech (1982, p. 218). Noticing these rules and the close connection between the replies, Tatiana Slama-Cazacu introduced the concept of "dialogued syntax", defined as follows: "the situation in which the lines in the dialogue complement each other, forming a single syntactic unit, (a sentence, a complex sentence)" (Slama-Cazacu 1982, p. 219). Thus, according to the aforementioned scholar, there are links in the sentence that can repeat elements from the previous speech of the partners, links to complement each other in and through sentences, links with the own previous replies, opinions of their own or with previous replies of the partner (for example: "-When are you leaving?/ -When, tomorrow.").

Therefore, the dialogue in oral communication bears features such as: the presence of both partners, the alternative exchange of replies, the exchange of information and the linguistic form in which it sometimes appears, namely the syntactic-contextual chaining between replies (see Slama-Cazacu, 1982).

3. Communication management

In an organization, communication management involves the way of generating, conveying, understanding and interpreting ideas and facts about work performance and organizational efficiency. Both employers and employees need to be able to communicate in a proper manner, by developing their communication skills. Poor communication can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the messages, orders, recommendations.

The importance of communication management has been stated by some authors. In this paper, we will refer, for example, to Jeffrey F. Anderson et al., who concluded in their study (2010) that the CMC (computer-mediated communication) users appropriated and accustomed several means and procedures (such as turn allocation, turn taking, and explicit interruption management) from person-to-person dialogues in order to contribute to the development of the local management of conversations. The scholars further explain that at that moment "overlapping intermittent talk followed by lengthy strategic pauses" was employed in order to perform turn exchange, although the ideal (oral) conversation model was based on the "no gap, no overlap" principle. According to the scholars' general conclusion, computer-mediated exchanges seemed flexible as far as the modality modification was concerned; moreover, users immediately and even automatically used "both traditional and technical features of conversation management" in a creative manner (see Anderson et al. 2010).

In a different context, Evangelia N. Markaki et al. (2013, p. 319), in "Communication Management in Business. The Latent Power for Career Development", argue that the design of adequate and productive communication plans by employing several "resources" between various team leaders (such as supervisors and managers) and employees is often cumbersome; nevertheless, this approach can also be remarkably beneficial because it favors the understanding of those elements that imprint and shape human evolution. Furthermore, according to the same scholars, it concedes the development and intensification of one's personal aspirations, triggering thus efficient and adequate decisions and professional evolution. In these scholars' opinion, the communication plan provides assistance to "the organization, conservation and dissemination of the communication process".

Karolina Muszyńska and Susanne Marx (2019, p. 331), in "Communication management practices in international projects in Polish and German higher education institutions" discuss the results of their study, highlighting the practices which can improve communication in multilingual teams. They classify these practices into three categories: strategic ("clear lines and responsibilities", "cross-cultural competence", "high-quality communication planning", "adopting common working language among team members"), informational "(shared virtual space/project

knowledge center", "instant messenger, e-mail, GoToMeeting", "traditional phone calls", "communication time schedule", "using various communication channels"), emotional ("regular face-to-face communication", "encouraging team members to share feelings and chat informally", "kick-off meeting, review meetings, stand-up meetings", "frequent visits and staff rotation", "asking team members for advice, opinions, feedback").

4. Nonverbal communication

The consequences of language studying for linguistics, applied linguistics (language teaching) and other fields are of paramount importance. The necessity to tackle and analyze linguistic facts in terms of living reality, encountered in a certain situation or context, impacted by concrete elements, in general, and psychic ones, in particular, represents the foundation of the hypotheses validated by the psycholinguistic research of the last decade. These types of research engendered several consequences, such as: more data have been gathered on spoken language; a great deal of information has been amassed via "ancillary" methods (intonation, gestures, signs, facial expressions, linguistic context, situational correlates, etc.); many more data about conversations have become available. It has become evident that "ideal" speakers cannot be operated with, that real communication cannot be set aside or ignored and that utterances cannot be isolated from communication contexts.

Nonverbal communication comprises signs, gestures, signals, facial expressions, posture, appearance, in other words, the human body and some extralinguistic means. Such elements accompany, replace, repeat or emphasize words, coding and decoding meanings. The significance and role of non-verbal communication was demonstrated by Albert Mehrabian in 1967. In one of his studies, he concluded that only 7% of the message is transmitted through verbal communication while 38% is transmitted through voice and 55% through body language.

Body language can express different states and feelings: interest or boredom, fatigue, fear, anxiety, pleasure or disgust. People move their body during important discussions. Tilting the head, nodding, moving their hands, eyes, all these make us realize that the message of our discussion was successful or not. Experts argue that eye contact is crucial during discussions, conversations.

Nonverbal communication in business can have a crucial role especially when it comes to cultural differences in the same company or during negotiations involving people belonging to different cultures.

Nonverbal communication has the following characteristics: it is unconscious, unintentional (sometimes it betrays our emotions, thoughts); it comprises a number of separate codes that we need to learn, some of them being universal, carrying the same meaning in different cultures; the ability to use nonverbal communication increases with age, with experience. Those who communicate well nonverbally can be successful and build good social relationships. Messages sent by nonverbal communication provide information about personal problems or relationships to other individuals (James, 2008, p. 199). The same author discusses certain behavioral characteristics, such as: Nonverbal behavior always has communicative value; nonverbal behavior is often ambiguous, it expresses attitudes and feelings rather than concepts and ideas (p. 220).

In this way, nonverbal communication links languages and cultures as they often have the same meanings almost everywhere in the world. The expression of happiness, sadness, satisfaction, disgust, anger, agreement, disagreement cross the cultures and languages of the world.

In their work, *The Definite book of Body language* (2004), Allan and Barbara Pease explained the power of using open palms. Throughout history, the open palm has been associated with honesty and truth. They also think that office arrangements are mostly made in a way that shows the boss's power and status. Many people feel overwhelmed and helpless when they come to the employer's office because the atmosphere in the office reminds them of the lower status held by employees.

Besides gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, posture, proxemics, clothing, for example, is the result of personal choice, mirrors the personality of the person, is a sort of extension of the self and, thus, it communicates information. It can even affect behavior. Clothing and other accessories (such as watches or jewelry) can mark either a real or a fake social status. For instance, those persons who hold important management positions are more likely to dress in a special manner,

such as wearing sober suits and carrying briefcases. In addition, personal hygiene also plays a key role, having in view that smell and body odors usually send certain messages to many persons, even without being aware of it. (Mehrabian, 2007, p. 145).

5. Research methodology

In order to highlight the importance of both verbal and nonverbal communication, we propose a type of research that will be implemented in the first semester of the academic year 2022-2033, with the students majoring in Economic Sciences.

The research will be based on the following hypothesis:

In business activities, both verbal and nonverbal communication play a significant role in message comprehension and they should not be separated from one another in the teaching process.

The observation and the experiment will be the main research methods employed.

First, the students will undergo an initial assessment test, in order to establish their English proficiency level. Afterwards, they will be divided into two homogeneous groups with similar proficiency levels (i.e., the control group and the experimental one), based on their initial test results.

The teaching process with both groups will be focused on the same content, i.e., Job Interviews, Business Meetings and Telephone Conversations.

For the control group, traditional teaching methods will be used, with a focus only on verbal communication. Teaching activities carried out with this group will involve reading comprehension exercises, vocabulary and listening exercises and writing of dialogues on the topics of job interviews, business meetings and telephone conversations.

As far as the experiment group is concerned, the focus will fall both on verbal and nonverbal communication. Activities such as role-play, mock job interviews, speaking exercises, writing and performing dialogues will be implemented, focused on both types of communication (verbal and nonverbal). During these activities, students' attention will be drawn to the additional meanings brought to the message by nonverbal communication, such as signs, gestures, signals, facial expressions, posture, appearance. In their activities, students will be encouraged to use nonverbal communication both in conveying and understanding/deciphering messages. They will also be encouraged to compare the messages transmitted only via verbal communication and those transmitted by both verbal and nonverbal communication and highlight the additional meaning brought to the message by the latter. Moreover, in the development of the students' communication skills, attention will be paid to the impact of specialized terminology and to the features of English business language (see Maruntelu and Galbeaza Buzarna-Tihenea, 2020, p. 48).

At the end of the teaching period, the students will sit for another test that will focus on their understanding of several business dialogues on the taught topics. Both groups will receive identical test items.

6. Findings

We expect that the results of the final test will validate the research hypothesis according to which both verbal and nonverbal communication play a significant role in the comprehension of messages in the business context and, therefore, they should not be separated from one another in the teaching process. When the students' attention is also drawn to the human body and to some other extralinguistic elements, they will become more aware of some hidden meanings carried by the message, which sometimes are essential in fully understanding it and which can also be used by the interlocutor – to his/ her advantage – especially in negotiations.

Moreover, we expect that students will become aware that nonverbal communication also involves the subliminal and unconscious expression of various states and feelings whose understanding plays a crucial role not only in successful business conversations but also in daily ones.

7. Conclusions

When teaching business communication, the focus should fall both on verbal and nonverbal communication, as they complete each other when it comes to the correct understanding of messages. Moreover, students should also become aware of the different meanings conveyed by the same gestures or by other extralinguistic elements across cultures, as their misinterpretation can entail communication failure. Therefore, one of the ingredients of success (in one’s professional and personal life as well) – besides excellent verbal communication skills – is represented by exquisite nonverbal communication skills, which always complete the intricate puzzle of messages.

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