

The Ineluctable Verbal/Nonverbal Dichotomy in Social Interaction

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Abstract :

Conventionally, linguistic practice, social interaction in particular, and exchange of meaning between interlocutors entails systematic recourse to word and non-word communicative resources interdependently. The intersection of the vocal and gestural structures is a justifiably predominant sociolinguistic phenomenon in interaction, in terms of the actualization of communicative acts and meaning production. Along with this focus, this paper has endeavoured to review the bulk of communication and semiotics theories in their handling of the entrenched verbal/nonverbal dichotomy, mainly: the communicative system and configuration of signs paradigmatically and syntagmatically in the overall process of social interaction.

Keywords : communication ; kinesics ; proxemics ; paradigm ; syntagm.

Résumé :

D'un point de vue conventionnel, la pratique langagière, plus précisément l'interaction sociale, implique le recours systématique aux ressources communicatives verbales et non-verbales qui sont interdépendantes les unes des autres. En effet, l'intersection des structures vocales et gestuelles met en exergue des phénomènes sociolinguistiques prédominant dans la réalisation des actes de la communication et de la production du sens. Parallèlement, cet article tente de montrer, en général, l'importance des théories de la communication et de la sémiotique dans la compréhension de la dichotomie langagière verbale versus non-verbale et, en particulier, le système communicatif ainsi que la configuration des signes que ce soit au niveau paradigmatique ou syntagmatique du comportement langagière.

Mots clés : communication, kinésique, proxémique, paradigme, syntagme.

Introduction

Human communication as a cultural practice can but exist within the confines of the verbal/nonverbal dichotomy. *Homo sapiens* are the sole species capable of communicating by either mode conjointly (Sebeok, 2005), and it is hardly ever possible to conceive of human interaction beyond this fact. In this respect, the consistent correlation of the vocal actions with gestural, particularly *kinesic* and *proxemic*, repertoire is to a large extent deep-seated and both constitute sociocultural codes, which co-exist in a sense integrated rather than autonomous in the process of

human interaction (Hamers and Blanc, 1993; Finnegan, 2002). Each lays down paradigmatic sociolinguistic structures, from which to attain communicative resources for selection and configuration concurrently in order to give rise to syntagmatic chains whereby to generate meaning and communicative acts. The paper in hand seeks correspondingly to review and continue the tradition of mainstream communication and semiotics by highlighting the inevitable overlap of the verbal/nonverbal repertoires in the sociolinguistic context. The discussion below occupies in details the assumptions above.

1. The communication theory

Communication has been conceptualized in so many varied ways. A wide range of definitions circulate in the literature of communication studies, and all of which consent to grant the verbal and non-verbal modes on an equal basis in terms of function albeit differently.

To begin with, communication entails a language (Hudson, 198: 134). Language is “a self-sufficient system” (Abrams, 198: 94), by virtue of being a medium for meaning generation (Poynton, 1989: 6), as it sanctions the exchange of information between interlocutors. The same view is held by M. A. K. Halliday who casts light on language as being expressive of content and ideas (1970: 143) and a resource for the development of experiences (Berkowitz, 2003 : 94). These ends are attainable in such a way that the individual’s perceptual and inner realms are uniquely unfolded within the boundaries of his/her linguistic awareness (Cluysenaar, 1976 : 25 ; Malrieu, 1999: 42). This assumption is better accentuated by H.G. Widdowson who describes language as a social phenomenon, whereby to attain social ends on the grounds of “codifying those aspects of reality which a society wishes in some way to control” (1978: 208). Here, the linguistic codification of reality and the social particularities of a group is an overriding purpose language-users seek to achieve. Within the same focus, W. Leeds-Hurwitz draws attention to the uttermost functionality of a sign or key symbols within culture, which social actors emphatically put to good use so as to encapsulate cultural knowledge and meanings and pass on these as well (1993 : 32). Signs, thus, be they linguistically or non-linguistically realized, are the means whereby to communicate a wide range of social needs.

With these views in mind, language serves communication (Carney, 2003 : 53 ; Ennaji and Sadiqi, 1994 : 231) and is indispensable to social interaction (Lee, 1992: 49). Communication is in essence a functional

social affair (Cherry, 1993: 11). It is conceived of as a business of “*sending things*”, i.e. messages, between social actors (Corner and Hawthorn, 1993: 7). Leeds-Hurwitz accordingly puts forward that the human interactional system is essentially an aggregate of communication codes made up of elements and maxims for the behavioural exchange of information (1993: 72). This implies that the course of human interaction can be likened to behaviour wherein social actors have recourse to the communication codes, i.e. the communicative resources, in order to disseminate information between them. The same premise is held by R. L. Birdwhistell who conceptualizes communication as “a structural system of significant symbols (from all the sensorily based modalities) which permit ordered human interaction” (1970: 95). Birdwhistell in the light of this assumption points to the significance of symbols – that is, the communicative resources, whether in the form of verbal or non-verbal acts – as being communicative structures available for the process of human interaction.

Given this definitional framework, communication requires a language in order to exchange meanings and give rise to interaction. R. A. Hudson (1981: 134) and H. H. Stern (1990: 222) maintain that social interaction embodies both verbal and non-verbal elements. While the verbal act pivots, of course, on words, A. Mattelart and M. Mattelart articulate that the nonverbal language hinges principally on non-word modes such as body motion, facial expressions, eye gaze behaviour and the amount of physical space between individuals in interaction (1998: 52).

Hudson puts forward three chief roles of nonverbal language in interaction in conjunction with speech (1981: 134-137). Firstly, nonverbal behaviour serves as a *structure marker* of interaction, i.e. a communicative property, exactly the same as speech codes (ibid.:135-136). Secondly, nonverbal behaviour may also fulfill a *content marker* of interaction, for it can bear meanings (ibid.:136-137). Thirdly, nonverbal acts of communication may work as *social relation marker* – such as power-solidarity relations – between interlocutors and structure discourse on that basis as well (ibid.: 134-135). To clarify, the social relations between emitter and receiver and the structure of their verbal discourse can be unveiled by the body position and physical distance taken up in interaction: for instance, enormous distance implies social distance between interlocutors, while closeness may suggest an act of solidarity or intimacy. Taking into account this three-fold functionality of nonverbal acts, one may theorize these further within the confines of

communication by *kinesics* and *proxemics*, as two nonverbal resources widely witnessed and mostly performed jointly in human interaction.

1.1 Kinesics as a sociocultural code of communication

So far as kinesics is concerned, it designates the area of study of body motion in communication as being behavioural aspects involved in 'face-to-face interaction' (Cobley, 2005: 210 ; Cobley, 2010: 248). It is traditionally perceived as a focal component in nonverbal communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993: 76), a non language system (Kondratov, 1969: 38) and a sociocultural code, i.e. language, of human movement (Stam et al., 2005: 124). M. Argyle refers to kinesics as social acts which communicate definite messages (1993: 31). This view is upheld by R. Finnegan who confirms that kinesics enhances our communicative resources (2002: 37). According to R. H Winthrop, kinesics encompasses "communication by body posture, movement...kissing, bowing, crossing the legs, queering in lines, as well as more subtle movements of the head, trunk, and limbs" (1991: 38). All these constitute different aspects of kinesic behaviour.

In his book *Kinesic sand Context*, Birdwhistell (1970) proposes a conceptual framework to describe and analyze kinesic behaviour (as cited in Cobley, 2005: 210 and Cobley, 2010: 248-249). The proposed terminology assumes that "the least discriminable unit of body motion effecting a contrast in meaning was called a kineme... Kinemes combined into kinemorphs ; which in turn were proposed as components of kinemorphic constructions" (Cobley, 2005 : 210; Cobley, 2010: 248-249). In the light of this conceptualization, kinemes function as the minimal describable unit in the kinesic paradigm, whose combination to get heryield kinemorphs as being the structural components of kinemorphic constructions or bodily behaviour in interaction. Noteworthy here is that the kinesic elements are granted to convey meaning (Cobley, 2005: 210 ; Cobley, 2010: 249). Particular kinesic behaviour, in addition to its functionality to fulfil communicative tendencies, may likewise give rise to a wide range of potential meanings. For the sake of illustration, an instance of embrace is a nonverbal expressive practice of greeting, which may signal an act of hot welcome, mutual affection of either emitter and solidarity, to mention just a few.

A further point to accommodate in the discussion of kinesics is its conventionality, as it is set up by society (Elam, 1987: 70) as a sociocultural code (Stam et al., 2005: 21) and is "culturally organized and learned by individuals" (Cobley, 2005: 210 ; Cobley, 2010: 248).

Kinesics can accordingly be likened to a form of culture (see Ungar and Mc Graw, 1989: XII) and a sign, which requires some “previously established social convention”(Eco, 1976: 16): a sign here in simpler wording is a form of expression, be it verbal or nonverbal. According to M. S Semsadi, the notion of convention builds upon “agreement and conformity amongst social actors” regarding meaning, interpretation and usage of signs (2013: 200). Kinesics is thus culturally and conventionally configured and acquired by social actors (see Semsadi, 2013: 213-216, for an extensive account of nonverbal coding and conventionality of social organization).

1.2 Proxemics as a sociocultural code of communication

Another aspect of human nonverbal behaviour closely germane to kinesics is proxemics (Elam, 1987: 73). Edward T. Hall (1969) uses the term ‘proxemics’ to refer to the “interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture” (as cited in Gaines, 2010: 88-89). For Hall, the focal point in proxemics pivots on the notion of space as a cultural aspect. Elliot Gaines explains Hall’s premise stating that :

Space provides a meaningful dimension contributing to the nonverbal aspects of communication based upon cultural norms that dictate appropriate distances for people to stand from one another in specified social situations. We continually adjust to considerations about proximity established by cultural aspects of non-verbal communication. (2010: 89)

For Gaines, space, as what proxemics grounds on, is governed by cultural norms and functions as a nonverbal act of communication.

With more specification, Thomas A. Sebeok defines proxemics as “the study of spatial and temporal bodily arrangements... in personal rapport” (2001: 22). Or, in other words, the study of the sociocultural code which has to do with human closeness (Stam et al., 2005: 21) or the space taken up by social actors in their interactive communication. Being a sociocultural code, a social and culture-specific mode of communication, proxemics centres around the interpersonal space displayed by human behaviour in social environment (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1998: 52). It rests on structuring and manipulating space to communicate (Finnegan, 2002: 37), which covers the extent of physical proximity, believed acceptable in nature, between participants including ‘haptics’, the use of touch in communication (Hurley, 1992: 261). Hudson argues that proxemics, the distance taken up in interaction, aids to mirror power-solidarity relations between participants (1981: 135). He accentuates this assumption further by stating that “physical distance is proportional to

social distance in all cultures, so that people who feel close in spirit will put themselves relatively near to each other when interacting” (ibid.). One may infer from this that not only does proxemics show up as a nonverbal communicative medium, but it also arranges social relations between interactants.

Thus far communication has been theorized on the grounds of the assumptions above about language in general terms. Language serves a variety of social needs, amongst which dissemination of information, codification of reality, cultural knowledge and meanings and human interaction are predominant ends. In this respect, communication by means of kinesic and proxemic signs, within the circumscription of nonverbal language, constitute overriding sociocultural codes for interaction and organization. They are concurrently performed in social interaction in conjunction with the verbal mode. Elaboration on such correlation of either communicative mode is then the topic of the following section.

2. The overlap between the verbal and nonverbal codes

The verbal and nonverbal codes of communication interrelate due to the close affinity holding between them in social interaction. Sebeok draws attention to the fact that “only the members of the species *Homo sapiens* are capable of communicating, simultaneously or in turn, by both nonverbal and verbal means” (2001: 11 ; see Sebeok, 2005: 14-27). A. A Khan likewise points out that the verbal and nonverbal channels of communication overlap (2001: 3), so long as – in Sebeok’s expression – *Homo sapiens*, i.e. human beings, enjoy singularly the capacity to draw on the vocal and non-word codes on simultaneous basis or in turn. In this respect, R. Jakobson emphasizes that “verbal messages analyzed by linguists are linked with communication of nonverbal messages” (1974: 39, as cited in Sebeok, 2001: 137) : which, in other terms, signals that human beings “ interact by both nonverbal and verbal message exchanges” (Sebeok, 2001: 137). Thus, “how verbal and nonverbal signs intermingle with and modify each other...must be further considered conjointly by linguists” (ibid.). Such juxtaposition of the two codes is justifiably indispensable to communication. A. Barbour affirms that effective communication is brought about by the harmonious combination of verbal and nonverbal actions (2004: 1). J. F Hamers and M. H. A Blanc corroborate this premise with further clarification wording that “*language is accompanied by gestural repertoire*” (1993: 106), in that the kinesic and vocal actions are generally integrated rather than autonomous (Finnegan, 2002: 112). Movements closely coordinate

with the overall language and operate as a consistent part in the overall communication (Argyle, 1993: 32). Despite laying great emphasis on the bodily expression, it follows then that kinesics along with proxemics ally in coordination with the vocal mode to structure the total act of communication and give rise to effective interaction.

Broadening the scope of the interconnection between the verbal and nonverbal codes further, it is of considerable relevance to consult the communication theory (see Martin and Ringham, 2000: 36-37). In effect, Jakobson provides taxonomy of six elements that are ineluctably encountered in communication, namely : addresser, context, message, contact, code and addressee (see Martin and Ringham, 2000:36-37). On the grounds of this taxonomy, communication pivots on a message emitted by an addresser (sender) destined for an addressee (receiver) by means of a contact – visual and oral, for instance – between either interlocutor formulated according to a common code – such as speech, numbers, writing, etc. –informed by a recognizable context to enable making sense intelligibly (ibid.). In light of Jakobson’s communicative taxonomy, an interlocutor may want to employ either the verbal or nonverbal contact and code or associate both in the course of social interaction.

The last point to handle in this account derives from mainstream semiotics and appertains to the concepts of ‘paradigm’ and ‘syntagm’, by virtue of their weighty pertinence to expound on the intersection between the verbal and nonverbal codes of social organization. D. Chandler states that “syntagms and paradigms...are the structural forms through which signs are organized into codes” (2007: 84). He draws a distinction between the two terms by making use of Jakobson’s structural ‘axes’: “horizontal as syntagmatic and vertical as paradigmatic”(ibid.). Any cultural practice in this sense has “syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes” (ibid., : 86) or horizontal and ‘associative’ relations respectively (Hawkes, 1977: 26).

With reference to the paradigmatic plane, it is rather a selection *alaxe* (Leech, 1981: 11) and corresponds to F. de Saussure’s associative relations (1916 and 1983: 121, as cited in Chandler, 2007: 83) and determines “the possibility of substitution” (Culler, 1975: 13) as “a set of associated ... members... In a given context, one member of the paradigm set is structurally replaceable with another; the choice of one excludes the choice of another” (Chandler, 2007: 84-85). The paradigmatic vertical relations rest upon the substitutability of elements

(Lyons, 1970: 16; Sadiqi and Ennaji, 1999: 265). Chandler propounds that the paradigmatic plane relates to the selection and substitution of elements (Chandler, 2007: 83-84), which together formulate an associative structure of the paradigm set. By way of clarification, R. Stam et al. articulate : “ the paradigm consists in a ... set of units which have in common the fact that they entertain relations of similarity and contrast – i.e. of comparability and that they may be chosen to combine with other units ... Paradigmatic operations involve choosing” (2005: 9). In other terms, the units of a paradigm are susceptible to take up the same position mutually, which signals that the paradigmatic elements may supersede one another within the same set of units (Martin and Ringham, 2000: 98).

A propos of the second structural plane, the syntagmatic combinatory axe (Leech, 1990: 11) concerns ‘positioning’ or the possibilities of ‘orderly combination’ or ‘chains’, following Saussure (Chandler, 2007: 83-85). The ‘syntagmatic dimension’ accordingly is the juxtaposition of conventionally appropriate elements from paradigm sets (ibid., : 86), ‘linear concatenation’ (Cobley, 2005: 273; Cobley, 2010: 340) or combination of these consecutively in order to produce meaning (Martin and Ringham, 2000: 129). The outcome of such juxtaposition of paradigmatic members is ‘syntagmatic chains’ (Sebeok, 2001: 49). The same point is worded by Stamet al. who accentuate that the “syntagmatic operations involve combining”, in that the syntagmatic relationships call into play some sequential horizontal configuration of elements (2005: 9). The syntagmatic relations thus bear on construction (James, 1980: 38) or the possibility of sequential combination of units (Culler, 1980: 36).

By way of illustration, being a contact culture (see Mouaid, 1992: 35), the greeting act in the Hassaniyya community is a conventionally consistent compound structure of interaction, whose process entails paradigmatic recourse to two distinct sociocultural codes, verbal and nonverbal, in order that interactants would select from concurrently, and thus syntagmatically configure these to initiate communication via kinemorphic, proxemic and haptic constructions to serve as entry behaviour into the succeeding elaborate speech act. Performers give rise to this composite communicative act by mutual embrace, wherein synchronous linear concatenation of bodily motion, saliently close physical proximity and touch juxtapose along with speech. Semiotically speaking, the whole communicative act could be construed as an identity marker, in that only social actors from contact cultures like Arabs perform the greeting act consistently in such an intricate communicative

practice. Hence, the verbal / nonverbal dichotomy is already deeply entrenched in the Hassaniyya community.

By and large, communication as a cultural practice involves that the verbal/nonverbal modes intermingle with each other in any sociolinguistic context consistently, as established by cultural conventions, in the form of a composite sociocultural code for the occurrence of the overall interaction. For clarity's sake, linguistic practice implies that the paradigmatic plane, vocal and gestural, provides an associative structure whose members and these sequential configurations set up syntagmatic combinatory operations. Interlocutors indeed draw on these overlapping sociocultural paradigms, so that they can consecutively select signs in linear concatenation and arrange them within syntagmatic chains in appropriate sociolinguistic contexts, hence generate meaning and communicative acts.

Conclusion

So far this paper has been concerned with approaching social interaction in light of the literature of communication and semiotics. In effect, the paper has arguably laid great emphasis on the deep-rooted verbal/nonverbal dichotomy in the sociolinguistic context. It has likewise unfolded how social actors conventionally draw heavily on the inescapable vocal/gestural paradigms conjointly for the actualization of communicative acts and generation of meaning, a sociolinguistic phenomenon much entrenched in human linguistic behaviour.

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