

EFFECTIVE SPEAKING: THE ART OF ENHANCING PARALINGUISTIC FEATURES

DR. BAISHALEE RAJKHOWA

Abstract: In the professional world, acquiring effective speaking skills is imperative. In the entire public speaking situation, the toughest challenge that a speaker actually faces is to make the audience listen to his/her speech. As our career progresses, acquiring effective speaking skills becomes more important. At the entry level, executive require mostly technical skills, but as they rise in management, they are required to rely less on technical training and more on their ability to sell their ideas and plans to the next level of management. Failure to professionally present one's work, ideas or organising in these situations may significantly affect the organisation's reputation.

Paralinguistic features are non-verbal cues that help us to give life to our delivery. Some linguists and psychologists who study communication expand the scope of paralinguistic features to include non-verbal components as well. The characteristic nuances of voice are quality, volume, rate pitch, articulation, pronunciation, and pauses.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of our speech, we require enhancing of the paralinguistic features by controlling the quality of our voice to create a greater impact on the audience.

Keywords: Effective speaking skills, non-verbal components, paralinguistic features.

Introduction: Speech making is a creative process by which the speaker intends to influence the audience with his/her ideas. In the professional world, a number of speeches are delivered every day. In the entire public speaking situation, the toughest challenge that a speaker actually faces is to make the audience listen to his/her speech. In order to achieve this, the speakers have to keep their speeches well planned, properly substantiated, adequately convincing and unquestionably relevant to the needs of the audience.

As our career progresses, acquiring effective speaking skills becomes more important. At the entry level, executive require mostly technical skills, but as they rise in management, they are required to rely less on technical training and more on their ability to sell their ideas and plans to the next level of management. Failure to professionally present one's work, ideas or organisation in these situations may significantly affect the organisation's reputation. And most certainly may affect one's career growth.

In order to achieve confidence, clarity and fluency in speech, the speaker should have the capability to persuade his/ her audience to understand, appreciate and possibly follow his/ her line of thought. It should be convincing, supported by figures and facts and be able to create an impact on the audience.

Our voice reflects our personality and hence it is important to cultivate a good voice. Our voice quality depends on various factors such as our vocal habits developed since our childhood and the structure and conditions of our speech organs. Though our voice cannot be changed much, but we can improve on it by enhancing other aspects such as pitch, rate and volume.

Paralinguistic communication refers to the study of human voice and how the words are spoken. Paralin-

guistic features are non-verbal cues that help us to give life to our delivery.

Since our voice is our trademark, it is that part that adds human touch to our words. The characteristic nuances of voice are quality, volume, rate pitch, articulation, pronunciation, and pauses.

Paralinguistics has to do with the aspects of language that do not relate to the formal systems of language such as phonology, syntax, grammar etc. The features of paralinguistic fall into two categories. The categories are:

- Vocal paralinguistic features
- Body paralinguistic features

Vocal Paralinguistic Features: Vocal paralinguistic features relates to how we say something. They are also the vocal signals beyond the basic verbal message. We can speak loudly or softly which are characteristics of volume. The tone of our voice can be changed as well. A high tone can indicate nervousness or a question and even anger in some people. A low tone indicates doubt or authority in some people. All of these features convey intention and are influenced by circumstances.

Quality: It is important for the speaker to introduce inflections in his/her voice and make proper voice modulation. While the quality of one's voice cannot be changed, it can be trained for optimum effect. Each of us has a unique voice and its quality depends on its resonating mechanism. Voices can be rich and resonant, soft and alluring, thin and nasal, hoarse and husky, or harsh and irritating.

Volume: Volume is the loudness and softness of the voice. Our voice need not be always loud. While speaking to a large audience, our voice should be loud and if the place is small and enclosed, the volume should be low. A high volume voice may

sound boorish and insensitive, whereas if it is too low we may convey an impression of timidity and lack of confidence. One way to improve our voice quality is through reading aloud so that it improves our voice. The volume of the voice should be adjusted according to the acoustic arrangements of the room.

Pace/Rate: Rate is the number of words that one speaks per minute. The normal rate is about 120 to 150 words per minute. But the rate varies from person to person. We should therefore cultivate our pace so as to fit in this reasonable limit. A slow speaker may be considered as very uninteresting even though the contents of the speech may be very rich. Similarly, a fast speaker causes discomfort as the listeners do not get enough time to grasp the thoughts and switch from one thought to another. Thus, it is appropriate to vary the speaking pace with pauses to create emphasis.

Pitch: Pitch refers to the number of vibrations of our voice per second. The rise and fall of our voice conveys various emotions. Similarly, inflections give lustre, warmth, vitality and exuberance to our speech. Low pitch indicate sadness, shock, dullness, guilt etc. A well-balanced pitch helps us to be clear and to avoid being monotonous. A variety of pitches should be used to hold the listener's attention. Changes in pitch give our voice the focus, warmth and vitality. Pitches reflect whether we are making a statement or asking a question.

Articulation: Speakers should be very careful not to slur, chop, truncate, or omit sounds between words and sentences. If the sounds are not uttered properly, the flow of understanding gets interrupted and hinders the listener from grasping the meaning of the message. The speaker's credibility is lowered when there is a lazy articulation, slurred sounds, or skipping over words. So the speakers should develop the ability to speak in a clear, crisp and lucid manner without causing any confusion.

Pronunciation: Pronunciation requires us to speak sounds in a way that is generally accepted. The way is to follow the British Received Pronunciation (BRP). One should carefully pronounce the individual sounds with stress according to the set norms.

Voice modulation: Modulation is the way we regulate, adjust the tone, pitch and volume of the speaking voice. It brings flexibility and vitality to our voice as we express our emotions and sentiments. Without modulation, our voice tends to be flat. Word stress and sentence stress also play an important role in voice modulation.

Pauses: A pause is a short silence flanked by words. A pause helps the speaker to glide from one thought to another as it helps the speaker to comprehend the message accordingly. But pauses should be used judiciously. Vocalised pauses and segregates should

be avoided as far as possible. Managing and using the right pauses may be challenging in the beginning. But, with practice, we can realise how correct pauses can be used during our speeches.

Body Paralinguistic Features: Paralinguistic features of the body is how we communicate meaning through the use of our body. It is the way the body communicates. Some linguists and people who study communication expand the scope of paralinguistic features to include non-verbal components as well. The cultural context also colours what these behaviours mean as well.

Facial expression: Face is the most expressive part of our body. When we frown, smile, raise our eyebrows, etc. we share different forms of information. Clenching the teeth and biting one's lips also sends a message. So facial expression must be kept quite natural.

Gesture: Gesture is the movement made by hands, head or face. It is another form of body communication. Crossing out arms sends a message. Shrugging one's shoulders indicates that the person does not know or does not care. Scratching our heads indicates confusion or lack of understanding. Gestures should be natural.

Eye contact: Eyes are considered to be the windows through which the truthfulness of the words, intelligence, attitudes and feelings of the speaker is revealed. So, eye contact with the audience is important.

Posture: Posture generally refers to the way we hold ourselves when we sit, stand or walk. For example, slouching indicates laziness. When a person holds their head down it is often a sign of inferiority. If a person stands with hunch shoulder it sends a message as well. So posture should be examined and corrected if it is not appropriate.

Proxemics: Proxemics is the study of the physical space in interpersonal relations. Space is related to behavioural norms. In a professional setting, space is used to signal power and status. Normally, the closer two people are, the more intimate. The further apart two people are indicates a formal setting and hierarchy. So, space should be used according to the situation.

Chronemics: It is the study of how human beings communicate through the use of time. In the professional world, time is a valuable resource because by valuing someone else's time, we communicate our professionalism or seriousness both subtly and explicitly. Across cultures, time perception play a major role.

Conclusion: Paralinguistic features employed by a speaker provide nuanced meaning, communicate attitudes and convey emotions. It is through these that the speaker tries to persuade his/her audience to understand, appreciate and possibly follow his/ her line

of thought. They also alert the listener as to how to interpret the message. Many of the features are culturally coded and inherent in verbal communication often at the subconscious level. If the speaker falters on any of these finer aspects, he/ she fail to live up to the task of achieving its objective. Thus, to be an effective speaker, a speech should be prepared well after thorough research on the topic as success in the highly competitive environment today will depend

not just on the professional knowledge but also on the ability to present that knowledge in an appropriate oral form. One should also strategically overcome nervousness. Just as starting a speech innovatively is important, so is ending emphatically. In fact, many speeches become memorable because the speaker ends in an emphatic note and leaves the audience enthralled.

References:

1. Burgoon, J. Nonverbal Signals. In M.L. Knapp and G.R. Miller (Eds) *Handbook of interpersonal communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 1994. 2nd ed.pp.229-285
2. Kaul, Asha. *Business Communication*. 2nd Edition. New Delhi. 2010.
3. Lata, Puspa and Kumar, Sanjay. *Communicate or Collapse: A handbook of Effective Public Speaking, Group Discussion and Interviews*, New Delhi: Prentice- Hall of India, 2007.
4. Raman, M and Sharma, S. *Technical Communication Principles and Practice*. Oxford University Press. 2011.pp 116-135.
5. Rizvi, M. Asraf.. *Effective Technical Communication*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill. 2005.
6. Stephen, E.Lucas. *The Art of Public Speaking*. 7th Edition. Singapore: Tata McGraw Hill. 2000.

Dr. Baishalee Rajkhowa/Royal Group of Institutions/Guwahati/Assam/