

Intentionality, a Compulsory Dimension of the Nonverbal Component of Communication

LIVIA DURAC

University «Petre Andrei» IASI (Romania)

GHEORGHE DURAC

University «Al.I.Cuza» IASI (Romania)

Abstract

One of the most important conditions for the adequacy of communication process is, as it's well known, the intentionality, by which the information between transmitter and receiver takes place. This is the case for verbal component of communication. What about the nonverbal one, more exactly, do we consciously use, or do us not this language? And because the intentionality is based on conscious character of our inter-relations, it can be said that the communication occurs only when the transmitter send intentionally a message to the receiver. This would include speech and some nonverbal behaviors, such as different aspects pointing or attention maintaining. From the producing and receiving signs perspective, the intentional and conscious behavior might be differently approached. The tacit dimensions of communication may have an enormous impact for interlocutor further behavior and reactions. As Paul Watzlawick stated, the behavior might be "non-communicative" only if there is no other person around (in one way or another). Once the other person is present, the whole behavior becomes communicative. The paper aims to identify an answer to the following question: to what extent can we talk about intentionality, by referring to posture, gestures, and facial expressions, shortly, to nonverbal communication component? This is justified by different researches' points of view: those who support this possibility and those ones who amend it. Another issue the present paper aims to approach is that that people send messages about them through body language, but not in a declarative manner, as part of a discourse; this raises some questions about nonverbal valences

When I used to perform the task of bringing to the light what people keep hidden inside them, not through the constraining power of hypnosis but observing what they say and what they show, I was thinking that it was more difficult than it really was. Who has eyes to see and ears to hear can convince them that no mortal can keep a secret. If lips are sealed, they talk with the tips of their fingers; betrayal comes out of every pore. And so, the task to make aware the most hidden places of the mind is quite doable.^[1]

Having at our disposal various phrases for naming it — *body language, nonverbal language, nonverbal communication/ behavior, gesture language*, the approach of the role this component plays in the normal development of the communication process has been the object of rich series of research, starting from the last decades of the previous century. And, definitely, the questions that still need an answer, increasing its significance, are numerous.

We aim to illustrate in an objective manner — as much as possible — the valences of the nonverbal component, underlining its importance, as it fulfills the functions of *helping, supporting, and completing* the verbal component. Starting from one of the basic characteristics of communication, we will show how much nonverbal behavior is produced with the *intention* to transmit information, and how *aware* we are of its usage in daily interactions, in order to demonstrate its indispensable nature in the proper development of the process. We mention that, since we are interested in the nonverbal dimension of language, the reference to the role of the lexeme in communication is concerned only with operational issues.

P. Watzlawick debates the idea that the process of communication is an exchange of information, which takes place only as a result of intentionality. He extends the concept according to which communication includes the entire behavior of a person (as physical/ virtual presence). Although the tacit dimensions of communication can be unintentional, they have a huge impact on the subsequent reactions and behavior of the other person. Behavior can be «non-communicative» only if no other person is present (one way or another). If a second person is present, the entire behavior becomes communicative, hence the well-known axiom «It is impossible for man not to communicate.»

Paul Watzlawick and his collaborators express the determinant role of the interaction in the axiom of the «impossibility not to communicate». The whole behavior (verbal and nonverbal) that occurs between persons that are aware of each other's presence has certain effects on them, be they intentional or not. Such effects have the value of an interpersonal message, becoming communicative through their nature. Since it is impossible for people not to behave one way

[1] S. Freud S, 1957b «The unconscious», in J. Strachey (editor & translator), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, p. 170). London: Hogarth Press, p.94.

or another, results that within the interaction, it is impossible for us not to communicate.^[2]

The lack of the possibility not to communicate determines the meanings of verbal and nonverbal behaviors for the others. It is more than probable that nonverbal signals are as important for the relationship with the other as spoken words.

In an interview from 1977, P. Watzlawick was asked about the existence of critical points of view, according to which axiom no.1 «forces» the borders of what represents, in fact, communication. His answer was that, if we are interested in the exchange of information, which we call a conscious, deliberate, voluntary level, there results that intentionality is an essential ingredient of communication. But, if we adopt the idea that *the entire* behavior is communication in the presence of another person, this viewpoint needs to be extended to that of the axiom. For a better understanding, the author exemplifies through a life situation of his own, during a scientific symposium in the Rocking Mountains. Here, the participants were accommodated in a series of two-room bungalows, where the separating wall was rather symbolic, being extremely thin. When he retired to rest at noon, Watzlawick heard his bungalow colleague entering the adjoining room and pounding his feet as in a *step dance*. Obviously, his colleague and friend did not suspect he was heard, and therefore, in order not to embarrass him, Watzlawick stood still. The author speaks of the clear absence of intentionality in this case, but mentions the high impact he had on the colleague's behavior.

The explanations received have lead the interviewer to another question: «Is there any behavior that you would not characterize as communication?», and the answer was: «Well, if no one is around, we face the well-known interrogation: *Does that majestic tree in the forest produce any rustle if there is no one to hear it?* For communication to occur, there must be at least one other person».^[3]

The distinct feature of communication, its *intentionality*, belongs to the tradition of semiotics, starting with Eric Buysens^[4], continuing with Luis Prieto^[5] and Georges Mounin.^[6]

According to L. Prieto, any communicational act implies an intention from the part of the emitter, which has to be identifiable by the receiver. Only this way can messages be transmitted; Prieto explains the fact that, in the case of a lack of intention from the emitter, the information noticed by the receiver is not a sign, but an index. The transmission of signs is defined as communication, and the transmission of indices is named signification.^[7]

[2] a) G. Bateson, «Exchange of information about patterns of human behavior», in *Information Storage and Neural Control*, Fields WS, Abbott W (eds). Thomas Books: Springfield, IL; pp. 173-186; b) P. Watzlawick, J.B. Bavelas, D.D. Jackson, 1967, *Pragmatics of Human Communication. A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes*.

[3] Paul Watzlawick, interviewed by Carol Wilder, in *Journal of Communication*, vol.28, no.4, 1978, *apud* Armand Mattelart, Michèle Mattelart, 1988, *Theories of Communication. A Short Introduction*, SAGE Publications, London - Thousand Oaks - New Delhi, pp.53-55.

[4] Eric Buysens, 1943, *Le langage et le discours*. Bruxelles: Office de la Publicité (revised edition: *La communication et l'articulation linguistique*, Bruxelles and Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1967.

[5] Luis Prieto: a) 1966, *Messages et signaux*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; b) 1975, *Études de Linguistique et de Sémiologie Générale*. Genève: Librairie Droz.

[6] Georges Mounin, 1970, *Introduction à la sémiologie*. Paris: De Minuit.

[7] L. Prieto, 1966, *op.cit.*, p.20.

Intentionality is based on the *conscious* character of the inter-relation with the ones around us. «...For the information transfer to become a process of communication, the emitter needs to have the *intention* to create a certain effect for the receiver. As a result, «communication» becomes *a process through which an emitter transmits information to the receiver through a channel, aiming to produce certain effects for the receiver.*»^[8] We will say that, within the process of communication, intention refers to the conscious attempt of the emitter to influence the receiver through the message; the answer of the latter is the reaction based on the assumption of the emitter's intentions.

Communication occurs only when the emitter sends *intentionally* a message to the receiver. This includes speech and some nonverbal behaviors, such as stressing different aspects or preserving attention. From the perspective of producing and receiving signs, intentional and conscious behavior can be approached from different angles. Donald MacKay believes that intentionality can be present in the following situation types:

- i. The sign is intentional, but not interpreted as intentional;
- ii. The sign is not intentional, but interpreted as intentional (non-intentional behavior is not interpreted, therefore it does not subscribe to semiotics).

Conscience refers to the degree to which signs can be conscious or unconscious for the emitter or the receiver.^[9]

A similar distinction is made by M Argyle, who describes the following possibilities:

- 1) Both the receiver and the emitter are generally unaware of the presence of the sign; (Argyle thinks that this situation characterizes most semiotic types);
- 2) The emitter is unaware and the receiver is aware of the nonverbal sign (for example, in diagnosis);
- 3) Both the emitter and the receiver are unaware of the presence of the sign, but influenced by it (for example, staring or pupil dilatation);
- 4) The emitter is aware but the receiver is unaware of the sign (for example, an actor that makes certain gestures).^[10]

Some of the nonverbal messages we transmit can be controlled consciously, while others cannot (disquietude/ agitation, generalized muscle tension, heart beat, blushing, etc.) even if we do not intend to. Position, how often we look at our interlocutor, are so automated that they are not included in the series of activities performed in a conscious manner. Most movements, however, serve more as indicators based on which we issue judgments and give significations. In daily communication, because of the way the perceptive system works, our attention is focused on decoding speech and gestures are often «unnoticed».

[8] J.J.Van Cuilenburg, O. Scholten, G.W. Noomen, *Știința comunicării*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2004, p.24.

[9] Donald MacKay, 1972, *Formal analysis of communicative process*, în R.A. Hinde (editor), *Nonverbal Communication*, Cabridge University Press, p.24.

[10] M. Argyle, 1975, *Bodily Communication* (2nd ed.), London: Methuen, p.5.

D. E. Broadbent^[11] reached the conclusion that what we receive through the perception channel, or what we follow, depends on a number of characteristics of the stimuli, inasmuch as they refer to certain features of the channel itself. These are limited to our ability to operate with the information received. When we say that we cannot follow two things at once, it is only partially true: what we cannot do, in fact, is surpass the ability of the system. Since two stimuli are present (verbal and nonverbal), the perception system gives preference to the one with a higher information density and a higher intensity: the speech we hear, which contains a higher information density, draws our attention, to the detriment of nonverbal forms of expression. Intensity germinates, giving language the material body to pass through the perception system; however, the non-coded events of the body language that are not intense enough will be neglected.

Some researchers (Rimé and Schiaratura, 1991) define their position regarding nonverbal behavior excluding it from the category of communication, as it is not usually considered intentional. People are not — generally — aware of the movements they make with their hands, legs, or other parts of their bodies, in daily conversational acts. Rimé and Schiaratura (1991) have issued the hypothesis that gestures that usually take place while speaking do not have, in fact, any role in communication. «Uninitiated persons usually believe that the gestures of the speaker's hands carry meanings that complete or supplement their words and sentences, thus influencing the recipient in the decoding activity.» The authors have brought the following arguments: (a) «People who have been personally involved in verbal interaction are, in the end, incapable of remembering anything of the gestures of the speaker's hand», in other words, the receiver does not usually give attention to the gestures of the speaker's hands; (b) «Subjects are incapable of guessing the contents of the speech to which the hand gestures refer», an aspect that supports the idea that they do not contain any independent access to the meaning expressed by words.^[12] Synthesizing, the gestures of the speakers are not produced for the benefit of the receiver; they are a type of by-product of verbal articulation. They may have a role for the speaker, in facilitating the process of verbal coding, but any communicational function is accidental.

The discourses we utter, in other words: what we leave available for the others to «read» manifests a certain degree of cohesion. There are messages that do not consist in facts, events, actions produced in isolation, but in the inter-relations of the person, which take place at different moments, from which all their behaviors derive, and not from the connection of some syntax as the one that combines words into sentences.

Such points of view are counterbalanced by the results of other studies^[13] that attest the importance of gestures in transmitting verbal messages. Berger and Popelka have been interested in the difference between the received messages, not accompanied by gestures, versus the spoken message accompanied by nonverbal language. The scores for the accuracy of the reception

[11] A.T. Dittmann, 1972, *Interpersonal messages of emotion*, New York: Springer, pp.156-171.

[12] B.Rimé, L. Schiaratura, 1991, «Gesture and speech», in R. Feldman & B. Rimé (editori), *Fundamentals of nonverbal behavior*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, pp.239-281.

[13] a) M.G. Riseborough, 1982, «Meaning and movement: An investigation into the interrelationship of physiographic gestures and speech in seven year olds» in *British Journal of Psychology*, no.73, pp.497-503; b) W.T. Rogers, 1978, «The contribution of kinesis illustrators toward the comprehension of verbal behavior within utterances», in *Human Communication Research*, no5, pp.54-62.

of the uttered discourses have doubled when the presentation was made in combination with gestures, compared to when the latter lacked.^[14] Similar studies^[15] have been concerned with the effect of gestures to draw attention: the speaker explained certain things, giving examples without gesticulating. It was noticed that the receiver, who was facing a different direction from the speaker, moved his visual attention to the former the moment when the speech was accompanied by gestures.

The fact that people transmit messages about themselves through body language, but not in a declarative manner, as part of a speech, raises question marks concerning the valences of the nonverbal. Again, research identifies answers. Feyereisen and his collaborators^[16] have concluded, through their study, that gestures produced by speakers contain semantic information, even if its nature is very general. To the same area of approach belongs the study made by Krauss and his collaborators in 1991, where they state: «Taken together, the results are consistent with the idea that gestures contain semantic information referring to the semantic contents of the speech they accompany»... «It is clear that gestures do not communicate as articulately as speech... but they include *some* information».^[17]

A speaker can use gestures to indicate the shape, size, or relative location of something, while using words to name them. The fact that people obtain information from gestures, when they accompany speech, as they integrate to spoken information, has been demonstrated through studies.^[18]

Finally, Adam Kendon (1985) states that: «gestures occur as an integral part of the communicational effort of the individual, who, in his turn, has a direct role in the process».^[19] This viewpoint is supported by other researchers, such as McNeill (1985, 1982), who places nonverbal discourse on the same «computational scene» as speech.

In conclusion, both verbal language and nonverbal behavior can be conceptualized as forming a system of signs or symbols that potentially connect people in the process of communication. Although it is not *discursive*, body language, having the role to accompany — giving it nuance and completing it — spoken language, it is indispensable for the construction, and respectively for the proper understanding of messages.

[14] K.W.Berger, G.R. Popelka, 1971, «Extra-facial gestures in relation to speech-reading», in *Journal of Communication Disorders*, no. 3, pp. 302-308.

[15] a) C.C. Heath. 1992, «Gesture's discrete tasks: Multiple relevancies in visual conduct in the contextualization of language» in P. Auer, A. di Luzio (editors), *The contextualization of language*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, pp. 102-127; b) C. Goodwin, 1986, «Gesture as a resource for the organization of mutual orientation», in *Semiotica*, no.62(1-2), pp.29-49.

[16] P. Feyereisen, M. Wiele, F. Dubois, 1988, «The meaning of gestures: What can be understood without speech» in *Cahiers de Psychologie Cognitive/European Bulletin of Cognitive Psychology*, no.8, pp.3-25

[17] R.M.Krauss, P. Morrel-Samuels, C. Colasante, 1991, «Do conversational gestures communicate?» in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, no.61, p. 751.

[18] a) J.A.Graham, M. Argyle, 1975, «A cross-cultural study of the communication of extra-verbal meaning by gestures». *International Journal of Psychology*, 10, 57-67; b) D. McNeill, 1992, *Hand and mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press; c) D.McNeill, 1985, «So you think gestures are nonverbal?» in *Psychological Review*, no.92, pp. 350-371.

[19] Adam Kendon, 1985, «Some uses of gesture», in D. Tannen & M. Saville-Troike (editori), *Perspectives on silence*, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, p. 27.

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