

The Issue of The Universality of Paralinguistic Means

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Abstract: This article examines the issue of the universality of paralinguistic means in human communication. Paralinguistics, which includes non-verbal elements such as intonation, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and voice quality, plays a crucial role in conveying meaning beyond verbal language. The study explores whether these paralinguistic features can be considered universal across different languages and cultures or whether they are largely culture-specific. By analyzing examples from various linguistic and cultural contexts, the paper highlights both common patterns and significant variations in the use and interpretation of paralinguistic signals. Particular attention is given to the interaction between verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as to the role of social, cultural, and cognitive factors in shaping paralinguistic behavior. The findings suggest that while certain paralinguistic cues (such as basic emotional expressions) demonstrate a degree of universality, many others are deeply influenced by cultural norms and communicative conventions. Thus, the universality of paralinguistic means should be understood as partial and context-dependent.

Keywords: Paralinguistics, non-verbal communication, universality, cultural variation, gestures, facial expressions, intonation, communication, cross-cultural studies, pragmatics.

Introduction: In the Linguistic Encyclopedic Dictionary edited by V.N. Yartseva, paralinguistics is defined as follows: paralinguistics (from Greek *pará* — “near, around” and linguistics) is: 1) a branch of linguistics that studies nonverbal means included in the structure of a speech message and transmitting semantic information together with verbal means; 2) the totality of nonverbal means participating in speech communication [See: Nikolaeva T. M. Paralinguistics // Linguistic Encyclopedic Dictionary / ed. by V. N. Yartseva. — 2nd ed., supplemented. — Moscow: Bolshaya Rossiyskaya Entsiklopediya, 2002. — P. 367]. This definition and classification are presented in the dictionary by T.M. Nikolaeva.

Three types of paralinguistic means are distinguished: phonational, kinetic, and graphic. Phonational means include the timbre, tempo, and loudness of speech, pause fillers (“uh”, “m-m”, etc.), melodic phenomena, as well as specific features of pronunciation of speech sounds, including dialectal, social, and idiolectal

characteristics. Kinetic components include gestures, selected types of posture, and facial expressions. Graphic means include the manner of writing letters and punctuation marks, handwriting, the methods of adding graphic elements to letters, and their substitutes, such as &, §, and similar signs. In this study, the focus is placed on the kinetic components of paralinguistic means, namely nonverbal means, and the issue of their classification.

The idea of the universality of paralinguistic elements, in a broad sense — nonverbal elements, exists in scholarly literature; however, it is usually interpreted with certain limitations.

First of all, the idea of universality is closely associated with the research of Paul Ekman. As a result of his studies, it was found that basic emotional facial expressions — such as joy, anger, fear, and surprise — are recognized in a similar way by representatives of different cultures [Original wording: “Basic emotions are associated with universally recognized facial

expressions.” See: Ekman P. An argument for basic emotions // *Cognition and Emotion*. — 1992. — Vol. 6, No. 3–4. — P. 169–200]. On the basis of this view, it is possible to conclude that nonverbal communication has a biologically grounded universal core.

At the same time, Ray Birdwhistell, one of the founders of kinesics, also considered human body movements as a systematic phenomenon and noted their recurrent features [He writes: “kinesic behavior is not random but highly structured.” See: Birdwhistell R. L. *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication*. — Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970. — 271 p.]. This means that certain nonverbal behaviors may appear in similar forms across different societies.

At the same time, Ray L. Birdwhistell also interprets human body movements as a systematic and structured phenomenon and particularly emphasizes their recurrent and meaning-bearing characteristics. According to the scholar, human gestures, facial expressions, body posture, and other kinetic means are not a collection of random movements, but rather constitute a specific communicative system. He writes: “kinesic behavior is not random but highly structured” [Birdwhistell R. L. *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication*. — Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970. — 271 p.].

Birdwhistell attempts to study human body movements in a manner similar to the linguistic system and demonstrates that they are formed on the basis of certain regularities. According to him, nonverbal means are an integral part of communication; they complement, intensify, or in some cases even replace verbal information. Therefore, body movements are regarded as a system of signs possessing independent semantic value in human communication.

The researcher pays special attention to the recurrent nature of gestures and facial expressions. According to him, certain nonverbal behaviors may manifest themselves in similar forms in different societies due to human psychophysiology and communicative needs. For example, facial expressions of basic emotional states such as joy, fear, surprise, or anger are observed in similar forms in many cultures. This indicates the existence of certain universal elements in nonverbal communication.

At the same time, Birdwhistell rejects the complete

universality of body language and notes that a large part of it is shaped under the influence of the cultural environment. According to the scholar, each society has its own kinesic codes, and a gesture that conveys a positive meaning in one culture may acquire an entirely different meaning in another society. Thus, nonverbal communication, on the one hand, reflects general human characteristics, while on the other hand, it appears as a system closely connected with cultural and social factors.

From the perspective of pragmatics, the meaning of paralinguistic means is formed not by their external form, but in relation to the communicative situation, speech intention, and social context. Therefore, the same gesture, facial expression, or intonation may acquire completely different pragmatic meanings in different communicative conditions. For example, nodding may indicate affirmation in some cultures, while in other cultural environments it may express negation or hesitation. Similarly, a rise in voice pitch may indicate surprise in one situation, while in another it may express aggression or irony. This shows that the meaning of paralinguistic means is not constant or absolute, but rather dynamic and contextual in nature.

In modern linguopragmatic studies, nonverbal means are interpreted as one of the main factors that shape and interpret communicative intention. In particular, the interaction of verbal and nonverbal means in the process of communication plays an important role in the full understanding of pragmatic meaning. Therefore, in some cases, the same verbal unit may produce opposite meanings when used with different intonation or facial expressions. This indicates that the pragmatic function of paralinguistic means may be even stronger than their semantic content.

Moreover, the interpretation of paralinguistic means also depends on the cultural experience, social status, age characteristics, and communicative competence of the communicants. Studies show that when perceiving nonverbal signals, a person relies on semiotic stereotypes formed within their own culture. As a result, a gesture or facial expression considered natural in one culture may be misinterpreted by a representative of another culture. It is precisely this aspect that gives rise to pragmatic mismatches in intercultural communication.

Thus, two main positions can be distinguished in the scholarly literature studied: first, the existence of limited universality is recognized for certain paralinguistic means, especially facial means expressing basic emotional states; second, the majority of nonverbal means are evaluated as phenomena that are culturally and contextually conditioned. Therefore, in modern research, the issue of universality is interpreted not as an absolute and rigid phenomenon, but as a gradual and relative phenomenon — a “universal gradient.” This approach shows that paralinguistic units simultaneously possess both a biological-human and a socio-cultural nature.

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