

Axel Satzger/Gina Poncini (eds.)

International Perspectives on Business Communication

From Past Approaches
to Future Trends



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Vocal and Gesture Delivery in Business Communication: From the Past to the Future

Annalisa Zanola Macola

1 Introduction

Businesspeople in general are very much concerned with their manner of speaking. However, not always are they conscious of the fact that, luckily enough, powerful and persuasive communication in careers has a long tradition. In fact, the American tradition of elocutionary schools, as well as the endless tradition of rhetorical studies, can give us a lot of suggestions about the development of a *science of speech*, with particular attention to business communication in English.

Teaching English as a foreign language to a public of budding Italian businesspeople, I found myself necessarily involved in the field of business communication. I witnessed together with the students how important it is to keep in mind that, when we conduct business activities in a foreign language, we communicate with others and that we do it in three primary ways: *body language, tone of voice, and content*. Indeed, in face-to-face contact, body language has the greatest impact, followed (at a significant distance) by tone of voice and then content.

My aim here is to show how the principles of some past studies in the field of rhetoric may be easily adapted in a modern perspective to improve students' speaking and reading, as the main cues to *effectiveness* in oral business communication in general, or to public speaking in particular. My experience in a Business English course for students of English Linguistics at the Catholic University of Milan (Faculty of Foreign Languages) has offered us a good field of application for these theories. As a matter of fact, these are only the very premises of a wider project on which I am now working in a more in-depth manner, with students of English at the Faculty of Economics (Università degli Studi di Brescia): the final results are still under discussion and they will be presented only following a discussion at an interdisciplinary level inside the same Faculty. As a consequence, the present paper takes the form of an *introduction* to the subject and it does not intend to be exhaustive.

The special nature of the experience comes from the kind of group I worked with, more than from the content discussed. Although the content might sound well-known to an audience of business communication experts, they are not at

all obvious to a group of Italian students trying to learn a language in order to improve their communicative performance. Most of them approached the course with suspicion because they were convinced that the subjects we wanted to treat were secondary to their traditional linguistic training. Later on, all of them realized that not only was the chosen approach important for their education, but even essential for a job in the business field.

2 Rapport and Interaction in Communicating for Business Purposes

Communication in business contexts, like any other form of communication, is a *human activity*: as a consequence, it is interpersonal, it is purposeful, and it is a process (Mudd/Sillars 1991). Being a process, it is dynamic, continuous, contextual, and irreversible at the same time (Berlo 1971). We shall insist here on the *irreversible* (or irrevocable) side of communication: it means that once a message goes out, it cannot be called back. You can try to modify, rescind, neglect, distort, amplify, or apologize for a message already sent, but you cannot delete it.

The starting point of my project is that *communication takes place in a constantly moving stream of time, and time is not reversible*. This apparently obvious idea produces an extraordinary effect, because that is, as a matter of fact, the reason why being *effective* in business communication is so fundamental: the nature of oral communication is transitory, temporary and short-lived, but in spite of this, oral communication for business purposes should be permanent or, at least, should have a permanent effect on the listener. As far as oral communication in a business situation is concerned, *voice and gesture* are the two indispensable features which fight against the irreversible time nature of our oral messages. This is why we are convinced of the central role of voice and gesture in this particular kind of communicative interaction.

In other words, effectiveness in oral communication in general, and in business communication in particular, may be compromised unless it is combined with variations in the speaker's voice and body movements. The perfect combination of these elements leads to pleasant *spontaneity*, which is the authentic key to success." He who speaks from heart", Thomas Sheridan used to say, "can never fall into any absurdity in his manner" (1970: 125). This is the path we have taken, because we have been always convinced that rapport and interaction in business communication are profoundly radicated even at this level. This aspect becomes even more interesting while working with Italian students who want to become "good business people" speaking "good English."

3 Developing Rapport: the Role of Voice and Gesture

One of the basic principles of successful oral communication we started to work on in my course was the importance of perfect *harmony* between intonation and gesture, where intonation and gesture are the human ideal devices to convey meaning. Intonation is different from most of the other areas of communication studied by rhetoricians and linguists, because it has more in common with gesture than with semantic areas or grammatical forms. Nevertheless, both gesture and intonation are tremendously important to any linguistic performance.

By "intonation", we mean the manner of utterance of the tones of the voice in speaking, the modulation of the voice, the rise and fall in pitch of the voice in speech. It indicates the act of performing the movements of pitch. Speaking sounds must have a slide, or inflection: any monotone inflection would be perceived as uninteresting by a listener. By "gesture", we mean any movement made with a part of our body, especially the hands and head, to express emotion or information, either instead of speaking or while speaking. Neither intonation nor gesture may be "absolute". In fact, every intonational contour, as well as every kind of gesture, is unique in its realization: tones of intonation and body movements are relative, not absolute.

4 Improving Oral Performance: Past and Future

One of the main objections from the students was the following one: if neither intonation nor gesture are absolute, may we have a model for "good" intonation and "proper" gesture, or not?

Interestingly, the history of linguistics seems to demonstrate that a "model" for both was once considered possible. As far as the study of oral performance is concerned, examples are scattered throughout the centuries: some sixteenth-century English treatises on punctuation (Hart 1969; Puttenham 1895) made the first steps towards the definition of a written "transcription" of an oral text; in the seventeenth century the study of English intonation and rhythm was improved with the precise aim of demonstrating the "Excellency" of the English language (Butler 1910); the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the flourishing of "delivery" all over Europe, because speaking opportunities were developing rapidly in parliament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and in polite conversation, and the demand for expressing ideas in oral English increased. In particular, that was the ideal period for studies on intonation and gesture to be developed. In 1775 the first impressive study of English intonation by Joshua Steele appeared (Zanola Macola 1996): this work pioneered a number of important frontiers in the subject of prosodic features as a whole. It was followed by John Walker's *The Melody of Speaking* (1787), a markedly pedagogical

treatise aimed at giving a guide to those who wanted to read and speak well (Walker 1970). Apart from Sheridan (1970), other eighteenth-century elocutionists kept to the traditions established by early English grammarians and elocutionists. In fact, the great majority of the eighteenth century writings confined the treatment of oral language to inaccurate generalizations on the motivational power of words, but concentrated on the relationship between language and gesture.

Centuries have passed, but no fixed rule about the correct and proper use of intonation and gesture has been found. And yet, what has been clearly stated since the seventeenth century (we are referring to John Hart, 1969) is that the listener's *eye and ear* (sight and hearing) should be harmoniously involved by the speaker's *melody of voice and gesture*. The parts of a speech ought to be combined into a suitable and attractive arrangement. Without harmony, the entire effectiveness of oral communication may fail. Harmony means: agreement, cooperation, accord, unit, balance, and symmetry.

The linguist Dwight Bolinger used a wonderful metaphor to describe the human voice:

The surface of the ocean responds to the forces that act upon it in movements resembling the ups and downs of the human voice. If our vision could take it all at once, we would discern several types of motion, involving a greater and greater expanse of sea and volume and water: ripples, waves, swells and tides. It would be more accurate to say ripples *on* waves *on* swells *on* tides, because each larger movement carries the smaller ones on its back (Bolinger 1972: 19).

Like a sea-storm, the human voice produces waves of sounds, supported by the intermingling of intonational contours and by gestures. In other words, we could interpret speech communication as a form of *rhetoric*: in fact, it uses the five traditional rhetorical canons to get a point across to the audience effectively. *Invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery* (in Latin, *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio*) are fundamental keys to speech. The last one, *delivery*, particularly influences the effectiveness of any oral performance.

Delivery is fundamental for effective business communication. The business person, the lawyer, the politician – as well as the actor or the minister of the church – have always been concerned with the manner of speaking. In the 19th century American elocutionists' writings, a first attempt was made to develop a *science of speech*: their manuals are an endless mine of information about reading and speaking skills (Zanola Macola 2000), speech sounds (isolated or in context), prosodic features, speech defects and speech correction. The teachers

from this movement were all eclectic in their theories and methods, taking what they considered best from other colleagues and adding ideas of their own. Their common aim was the sincere desire to improve the speaking and reading of the American people; their common interest was to study vocal mechanism and body movements, as the main cues to *effectiveness* in oral communication in general, or to public speaking in particular. Unfortunately, their followers sometimes brought discredit upon their scholars, because of misinterpretation and lack of serious study and appreciation.

5 The Unwritten Rules in Oral Performance: Elements of "Effective Presentation"

Convinced of the importance of a harmonious connection between voice and gesture, we tried to put my ideas into practice in my academic courses. Since most of my students are due to become "Experts in English for tourism and business" (this is the exact title they will have at the end of their studies), we had some lessons on *Elements of Effective Presentation*. The lessons were organized as a series of seminars, where the teacher (myself, together with some colleagues from other disciplines who were interested in the field) and a small group of students (maximum twelve) discussed the topics which are fundamental to an effective presentation in a foreign language, to a foreign audience, and in a business situation. These are the topics we discussed:

- 1) *The importance of the eyes in a business meeting and in a formal presentation*
- 2) *The supporting role of facial expressions*
- 3) *Body language and verbal communication: how should they be synchronized?*
- 4) *Elements of voice quality*
- 5) *Can body language be 'persuasive'?*
- 6) *Memorability and persuasiveness in a good presentation.*

I will summarize below the results of our discussions. These results will be used as the basis for organizing a further series of seminars where specific practice and exercises will be made in order to improve participants' effectiveness when presenting in English. This second series of seminars will include the use of visual aids and recordings of authentic business situations.

The results of our discussions are as follows:

- 1) *Eyes*. The starting point of the discussion was that people who don't engage others with their eyes are judged less credible than those who do, at least in cultural contexts familiar to the participants. This was considered to be logical, but all the students agreed in recognizing that it is easier said than done. If

speakers concentrate too much on the listener, they won't concentrate on what they have to say. If speakers stare over the head of the listener (or listeners) to cope with the discomfort of seeing too much, the speakers may seem talking to the air. The answer to the dilemma – how to look at the audience without being visually overstimulated – was discussed in the seminars. One of the things suggested to the students, for example, was to look and speak to one person at a time, when they have more than one person listening to them; they discovered that this technique has a wonderful calming effect both on the speaker and on the listener.

- 2) *Face*. The face is capable of a bewildering range of emotional expressions – perhaps over seven thousand different expressions are possible from the eighty muscles of the face! Unfortunately, without hard work, we won't be able to expand significantly our range of expression. The best way to improve my students' nonverbal behavior was to videotape their speech performances: turning off the sound and playing the tape forward, any repetitive motion will become painfully obvious!
- 3) *Body*. The first objective was to reduce random movement. After gaining control over nervous movements, the next step was to learn a wider range of *deliberate* physical expressions. In other words, becoming more "animated", but in a "rational way". This regularly took place when students were *involved in what they were saying*: in other words, they realized that they had to work *at feeling* the meaning of the words they used, rather than just saying them.
- 4) *Voice*. If the eyes are the windows of the soul, the voice is the front door. Benjamin Disraeli said that "[t]here is no index of character as sure as the voice" (Scott Cook 1989). The elements of vocal quality are many but most speech experts will say that our students will be "good speakers" if they:
 - are loud enough,
 - have an adequate and varied rate of speech,
 - use clear diction,
 - have a pleasant pitch,
 - have good phrasing,
 - use frequent pauses,
 - make a variety of intonational curves (rising, falling, or neutral).
- 5) *Persuasive body language*. There is good evidence that clarity and substance, content and organization can outweigh delivery skill in the persuasive balance. Certainly, factors *other than body language* affect the outcomes of persuasive contexts.

6) Memorability and persuasiveness. Some simple devices have been suggested to my students in order to make their oral performance in some way memorable and persuasive. Among them, some rhetorical effects have been underlined:

- ellipsis (for example, to leave out the "and" before the third phrase)
- asyndeton (the use of sentence fragments to quicken the rhythm)
- anaphora (when successive sentences are begun with the same word or group of words)
- balance (a balanced phrase opposes two elements, the first usually spoken with pitch going up, the second with pitch going down)
- rhetorical questions (to introduce an idea for discussion, to indicate misunderstanding, to make an accusation, etc.)
- hyperbole (exaggeration)
- repetition

Working on these six points was so successful (in terms of effectiveness of students' oral performance and in terms of personal satisfaction) that students found themselves more at ease with business communication on the whole. To start with, they appreciated studying business language even more, because they realized the enormous potentialities of the field. In conclusion, they learned that business language (Business English, in our specific case) is not necessarily "every statement about business". On the contrary, it is the more complex mechanism of communication which is activated on its whole.

6 Conclusion

As I said in my introduction, the subject I treated may sound "old" to an audience of experts in business communication but I hope that my approach will not. It is the great Italian writer Francis Petrarch who encourages me to go on at this point, when in his *Letter to Tommaso da Messina, Concerning the Study of Eloquence*, 1333, he wrote:

Why is it necessary for us to take so many pains, if all the things that are supposed to benefit people have already been written down in absolutely marvellous style by divine geniuses during the past thousand years and preserved in countless volumes? Put this concern aside, I beg you, and never let it induce you to be lazy, for certain ancestors of ours have already removed this worry, and I myself will now remove it for those who come after me: for although ten thousand years may pass and centuries pile upon centuries, never will virtue be praised enough; never will there be enough lessons about how to love God and to hate sinful pleasures; *never will the road to the discovery of new ideas be closed to eager minds.*

Therefore, let us be of good spirit: we do not labor in vain, nor will those do so who will be born many ages in the future right up to the end of this aging world. Rather, it is to be feared that men will cease to exist before their efforts in humanistic studies will have enabled them to penetrate the most secret mysteries of truth¹.

Eagerness for new ideas is my best friend throughout this "work in progress", together with a strong interest in oral communication in Business English. By adopting a historical emphasis in my work, I have given credence, it is hoped, to the notion that knowledge proceeds on a progressive plane. History reminds us of the fact that nothing in oral communication should happen by chance. Spontaneity in business communication is a goal that will be perfectly realized when body language, tone of voice and contents will be harmoniously joined together.

A real, living, growing language has always been a collection of spoken sounds. The sounds which accompany our thoughts, the prosodic features which join them in a complex "melody", and the gestures that accompany any speech are moulds into which we pour our own thought. It is our voice which gives form and direction to our ideas; it is our body which gives life to them.

The strong link which joins voice – in all its forms and functions – and gesture is too important a subject to be underestimated. It concerns linguists, who make a scientific study of language. It concerns phoneticians, who analyze the sounds of human speech. It concerns musicians, who are interested in the nature of rhythm. It concerns anthropologists, who must look at communicative behavior as a whole and will find in the human voice the spoken counterpart of facial expression and physical gesture. It concerns all those in the language arts, for whom the coloring of a phrase or the gesture accompanying it is as important as the phrase itself.

¹Francis Petrarch (1304-1374), *Letter to Tommaso da Messina, Concerning the Study of Eloquence* (1333?), (in *Familiar Letters, transl. from Le familiari*, ed. by Vittorio Rossi, Sansoni, Firenze 1933, I: 45-48). Quoted from: W. A. Rebhorn, ed. (2000). *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*. Cornell: Univ. Press, Ithaca and London. 17.

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