

Chapter 7.12

Electronic Paralanguage: Interfacing with the International

Katherine Watson

Coast Community College District, USA

ABSTRACT

Psychologists and linguists agree that communicative elements other than words alone transmit more than 65% of the meaning of any linguistic message. New messages in new languages can be learned quickly and in their cultural context if instructional materials are sheathed in the L2 (“foreign”) “electronic paralanguage” rather than in the students’ native “L1” language. That is, L2 acquisition can take place at an extraordinarily rapid pace if the Netiquette and interfaces, page layouts, buttons, and alternative correspondence styles of the L2 mode of expression are employed. Exemplary adult students of French as a Second Language have demonstrated achievement of unusually high-level reading, writing, and cultural competence skills quickly in an online environment that immerses them in their new L2. Indeed, these students’ success demonstrates at least two things: First, learning a new language may be at least as effective, and is clearly more

complete, in an online environment than it is in a traditional classroom, and second, that educators online should attend to all features of the electronic environment, rather than simply to the subject matter that it transmits.

INTRODUCTION

Psychologists and linguists agree that communicative elements other than words alone transmit more than 65% of the meaning of any linguistic message (Birdwhistell, 1952; Collier & DiCarlo, 1985). And it is not just kinesics, our “body language,” which affects the way in which our words are understood. Intonation and pitch, loudness, and the use of hesitations or pauses all comprise “paralanguage,” the influential vocal but non-verbal noise that sheathes every human utterance.

In cyberspace, it is page layout, background color, graphics-to-text ratio, arrangement of words and pictures on a page, and even typeface

which act as a kind of “electronic paralanguage,” enveloping the electronic texts and offering cyberspatial “suprasegmentals” that augment or detract from meaning. Web designers have begun to attend to page layout, line length, font, and page color, as these features affect cognition (Hudson et al., 2005), and non-English language users of the Internet have noticed how variations in these features affect understanding (Hudson et al., 2005, Vasquez, 2000). These “beyond-words” features of electronic data delivery can affect comprehensibility, if not comprehension, and they transmit ineffable cultural information.

Learning new subject matter online, with the aid of data delivered in the parlance that characterizes that subject matter and that envelopes it in the most pertinent electronic paralanguage, is different from learning in conversational contexts or in the traditional classroom. That is, just as the harmony of figure and ground can augment the message transmitted by a work of art, so can the concord of language and electronic paralanguage expedite understanding online.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES

Favored with a complicated cerebrum with which he can coordinate, communicate, and comprehend data transmitted aurally, visually, tactilely, or in writing, the human adult exploits his experience each time he takes on a new learning task, profiting from techniques honed throughout his life (Dobrovolsky, 2003). If his task is to learn a new language, the human adult will automatically try to compare/contrast/discern patterns in the new mode of expression that might relate to those of the language(s) he already knows (Singhal, 1998). Because babies learn their mother tongues while they are expanding their understanding of color, texture, sound, sight, and movement, the flowering of their first language, their “L1,” happens in parallel to development of cognition. Moreover,

L1 acquisition flows smoothly in a sea of L1 paralanguage.

But the learning of secondary languages, “L2s,” does not occur in like manner (Cook, 2005). Rather, it is self-analysis, self-criticism, and self-correction, all resulting from interaction with native speakers, that influence this process. Interaction is key, especially for the comprehension of the non-verbal, and yet novelty is a defining feature of all human expression. Indeed, it is the development of at least three sorts of competencies, explained below, that underlies human linguistic understanding (Thanasoulas, 2000).

Three Competencies Necessary to Understanding

Each sentence that each human being produces in any language is novel, never having been uttered before in exactly the same way or in exactly the same context, but people understand one another if they share basic *linguistic competence* in the same language. And perhaps even more interestingly, people know how to react to one another’s utterances, based upon their shared *communicative competence*, their ability not necessarily to create grammatically-perfect structures, but rather to say things that are contextually fitting in an appropriate way. Thus, if we humans understand one another’s grammatical structures, if we generally recognize that linguistic interaction is an amicable social act, then we are on the way to communicative competence.

As James (1969) has said, in defining this second sort of competence, “(we) can tell whether our interlocutor is speaking seriously or in jest, we can use information we have about the interlocutor to interpret his utterances (e.g., the political party he belongs to and whether he had a domineering mother) and our knowledge of whether the interlocutor is a stranger, a friend, or a professional foe (will) undoubtedly affect the inferences drawn about what his sentences imply.”

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