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# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Ramblings of a Neuro-Linguist: The Impact of Voice on Communication

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Much has been written about the impact of body language on communication. I have in a previous [entry](#) addressed the connection between non-verbal communication and the building of rapport.

While body language is the commonly used term, I prefer the term non-verbal communication for two reasons.

First, the term “body language” is a metaphor that gives one the impression that one’s body signals communicates content, akin to words and sentences. Hence the popularity of views that if one crosses one’s arms or legs for example, this communicates negativity or non-receptiveness or that if one’s eyes shift from side to side, that person must be lying. This stems from what the writer terms as the interpretive model i.e. that one is seeking to “read” someone’s body language in a bid to make meaning of what is being communicated.

The field of Neuro-Linguistics’ approach to this is that while these interpretations could be accurate, we actually have no clue whether they are or not. The meaning of signals does vary according to cultures and contexts. To be fair, most authors on body language also make the point that one should always be aware of the impact of culture and contexts on our interpretations.

As such, the interpretive model, as a means of making meaning, is flawed at best. The term “non-verbal communication” is more accurate as one’s signals can provide communication, not just about content, but also about context and process. Put another way, non-verbal signals are messages about the message. It is a form of meta-communication.

Secondly, the term “body language” seems to limit one’s signals to visual ones. I course, it is trite that non-verbal communication includes the component of voice. According to a study by Mehrabian, 38% of the entire package of communication is based on tonality, whereas physiology comprises 55% and words only 7%. While some doubt has been cast on these figures from the initial study, there is still general agreement that non-verbal communication forms the majority of the communication package and that where the non-verbal and verbal aspects conflict, the former tends to override the latter.

I suspect readers will have had experience of this; where they have found the speaker’s physiology and tone to be incongruent with the words they are saying. For example, imagine when someone says they are happy yet their physiology is hunched, they are looking downwards and their speech

is slow and atonal. We are less likely to believe they are happy because of the incongruent non-verbal signals. These non-verbal signals, as meta-communication, serve to reinforce or conflict with the content portion of the communication package.

The question is sometimes asked whether tonality does play such a large percentage of the communication package. I generally illustrate this through an experiment in two parts. In part one, I ask someone to close his eyes (so as to remove the physiology component of the communication package). I then shout at him in an angry tone and say “You Bastard”. I then ask him to take stock of how that piece of communication made him feel. In part two, I ask him to reset his feelings and close his eyes again. I then say to him the same words “You Bastard” but this time in as sultry and sexy a tone as I can manage. While this second iteration engenders quite a number of different responses, in every case, the response in part 1 and in part 2 are very different. And the only variable was tonality.

Having established then that tone makes a difference, I’d like to suggest two ways in which we can use the tonal aspects of communication to enhance our practice as mediators and professional communicators.

The first way involves inflection. When we speak, there are three types of inflection. There is the question, the statement and the command. These have an upward, even and downward inflection respectively. Depending on the inflection that one uses, the same statement can be given nuance. For example, as you read the following statement out loud, consider its internal effect on you.

Let’s explore solutions? (Questioning, Upward Inflection)

Let’s explore solutions. (Statement, Even Inflection)

Let’s explore solutions! (Command, Downward Inflection)

The Upward Inflection tends to seed doubt whereas the Downward Inflection tends to seed compliance. This can be useful in processing what people say as well as assisting us in structuring our communication.

For example, when a party says “I am not sure we can come to agreement” but uses an upward inflection, this may be an indication that the speaker does not fully believe in the statement and there may be movement for negotiation.

Even if the party should use an even or downward inflection, one could repeat or paraphrase the statement but use an upward inflection before immediately following up with a process suggestion with a downward inflection. For example, the mediator could say “So, you are not sure we can come to an agreement (upward inflection) yet your being here today means that you are willing to explore solutions. Let’s make our best efforts to solve your mutual problem (downward inflection).”

This of course highlights the importance of our ensuring that our inflection matches our communication. When we wish to seed doubt, we need to deliberately use an upward inflection and when we wish to suggest compliance, we need to use a downward inflection.

The second way we can use the tonal aspect of communication is through nesting/embedding process suggestions within a larger statement. This comes from the field of Ericksonian hypnosis and is part of the process of indirect suggestion.

Consider the statement:

“I’m not suggesting that we can easily {find a solution to this problem} but that {we can work together} to do so”

Within the context of the larger sentence, there are a couple of process suggestions that are nested/embedded. These are delineated within the curly brackets. The idea then is that by marking out the nested/embedded statement during speech, the listener’s subconscious mind will accept the suggestions and find a way to comply with them.

How does one mark out these nested/embedded statements? One way is through tone. The tonal component includes pitch, timbre, volume and speed. By varying these aspects of tone, one marks out for subconscious attention the process suggestion. For example, when one is making the process suggestion, one could say it in a deeper pitch or slightly louder or a bit slower. One could also mark out the process suggestions by pausing briefly before and after the suggestion. One could also combine the notion of marking out with a command inflection so that as one is speaking the suggestion (in an appropriately marked out manner), one could add a downward inflection to add even more emphasis.

At this point, it is useful to make a few points by way of caveat.

First, the suggestions made here are in the context of the English language and is where the writer’s experience of its use has been. The writer is fairly certain that the idea about inflection will not be applicable in languages which are tonal for example Mandarin or some of the other Chinese dialects. In these languages, tone and inflection plays a significant part in meaning. The same sound with a different inflection creates a different word. However, the writer suspects that as long as the language shares English’s Latin roots, the same ideas should work.

Second, even within the English speaking world, culture plays a part. There are some cultures who, when speaking, seem to consistently adopt an upward inflection. Yet others seem to constantly be speaking in exclamations. (I won’t mention names but you know who you are!) This is not to say our use of inflection on them won’t work, but that we should be cautious in attributing doubt or certainty to what they are saying due to their habitual speech patterns.

Finally, none of what has been suggested here is 100%. Just as there is never an guarantee a particular reframe or process suggestion will work, so it is the way with the use of inflection and nested/embedded statements. It is not a magic bullet. However, when used to support and reinforce the process of communication, it is the writer’s experience that there is significant effect when constantly and consistently used. I hope this had given you some ideas and I invite you to play!

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