The importance of non-verbal communication in professional interpretation

In order to be able to work properly interpreters need to make sense of non-verbal cues. Emotional intelligence is thus a sine qua non of their skill set.

Chantal BESSON, Daria GRAF, Insa HARTUNG, Barbara KROPFHÄUSSER, Séverine VOISARD.
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The choice of the subject of this paper might seem surprising at first, as many people would not perceive much non-verbal communication when a simultaneous interpreter works nearly invisibly in his booth - a very common image of interpretation in people’s minds. Nonetheless, it exists and in this paper we examined its many aspects.

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1. Introduction

It is quite usual to forget about many aspects of non-verbal communication when hearing this notion. In fact, what comes to mind immediately are body gestures or facial expressions. However, there are many more aspects.

For this reason, chapter two begins with a definition of non-verbal communication and chapter three illustrates these definitions with examples. They also show the importance of non-verbal communication in daily life.
In the following paper, the task of the interpreter is analysed in two steps: first, the transfer of a message from the speaker to the interpreter and secondly, the transfer of this message from the interpreter to the audience.

The first step is discussed in chapter four, which deals with certain neuroscientific aspects of the process of interpreting non-verbal communication. It is also about the importance of face-to-face situations and shared culture with respect to interpreting non-verbal communication. Furthermore it is mentioned, which role emotional intelligence plays in the understanding process for non-verbal communication.

Finally, chapter five talks, with reference to the examples in chapter three, about the difficulties of non-verbal communication for the interpreter. Chapter five describes what possibilities the interpreter is given to reproduce non-verbal communication.

Sign-language, one form of non-verbal communication, is not discussed in this essay. In fact, this is a language in itself. Even if body gestures and facial expressions are part of this language, which would correspond to the definition of non-verbal communication in chapter two, it cannot be regarded as non-verbal communication. Sign-language is a system closed in itself and needs special training as well as for any other natural language. Therefore, this aspect of interpretation was not taken into account for our essay.

2. Definition of non-verbal communication

There are scores of definitions that researchers and scholars use to define non-verbal communication. Among the definitions we have studied, we chose and developed the points that seemed essential to us with respect to the frame of interpretation that is given for this essay.

Non-verbal communication consists of all the messages other than words that are used in communication. In oral communication, these symbolic messages are transferred by means of intonation, tone of voice, vocally produced noises, body posture, body gestures, facial expressions or pauses (see chapter 3. examples).

When individuals speak, they normally do not confine themselves to the mere emission of words. A great deal of meaning is conveyed by non-verbal means which always accompany oral discourse – intended or not. In other words, a spoken message is always sent on two levels simultaneously, verbal and non-verbal.

Non-verbal behaviour predates verbal communication because individuals, since birth, rely first on non-verbal means to express themselves. This innate character of non-verbal behaviour is important in communication. Even before a sentence is uttered, the hearer observes the body gestures and facial expressions of the speaker, trying to make sense of these symbolic messages. They seem to be trustworthy because they are mostly unconscious and part of every-day behaviour. People assume that non-verbal actions do not lie and therefore they tend to believe the non-verbal message when a verbal message contradicts it. This was proven in tests in which subjects were asked to react to sentences that appeared friendly and inviting when reading them but were spoken angrily. In short, people try to make sense of the non-verbal behaviour of others by attaching meaning to what they observe them doing. Consequently, these symbolic messages help the hearer to interpret the speaker’s intention and this indicates the importance of non-verbal communication in the field of interpretation. In daily conversations it often happens that we do not understand what the other person wants to say. Thus we ask questions such as “What do you mean by this?” so that the speaker clarifies his message. The interpreter is deprived of this possibility and therefore has to fall back on other means allowing him to understand the speaker. This is the moment when non-verbal communication comes in, giving him subtle hints on how the message is to be understood.

From the speaker’s point of view, however, there are numerous functions of non-verbal behaviour – even if he or she is not aware of them. Human beings use non-verbal means to persuade or to control others, to clarify or embellish things, to stress, complement, regulate and repeat verbal expressions. They can also be used to substitute verbal expression, as this is the case with several body gestures (see 3.4. emblem). Non-verbal communication is emotionally expressive and so any discourse appealing to the receiver’s emotions has a persuasive impact.

Although many non-verbal means are innate and universal, (i.e. people in different cultures have a common understanding of these cues), the contribution of non-verbal communication to the total meaning of a discourse can be culturally determined and differ in different countries (see 3.4. use of the zero shape made by the fingers).

3. Examples

3.1. Intonation

Intonation is the way that the sender’s pitch of voice rises and falls when speaking. For example, it shows the interpreter whether the speaker expresses his or her message in the form of a question or statement. In the first case, the voice rises at the end of the phrase or the sentence and in the second case, it falls. At the same time, intonation indicates the end of an entity of information, which – in written communication – is shown by means of a comma, semicolon, point, exclamation mark or question mark.

Another function of intonation is to lay emphasis on a particular word or idea, a detail that the interpreter must not fail to be aware of.

3.2. Tone of voice

The tone of voice is a means by which the speaker implies his or her attitude to the message. It is also a means by which he seeks a reaction from the hearer. In a political debate, for instance, the tone of voice is likely to be rousing, whereas on television the daily
news is communicated in a more factual tone. Other examples of tone of voice are: aggressive, critical, nervous, disappointed, monotonous, friendly, enthusiastic, vivid, persuasive, etc.

3.3. Vocally produced noises

Spoken discourse can be accompanied by vocally produced noises that are not regarded as part of language, though they help in communication for the expression of attitude or feeling. Such non-lexical expressions differ in important respects from language: They are much more similar in form and meaning, i.e. universal, as a whole in contrast to the great diversity of language. Vocally produced noises include laughter, shouts, screams of joy, fear, pain, as well as conventional expressions of disgust, triumph, etc., traditionally spelled “ugh!”,”ha ha!”...

3.4. Body posture

Body posture is the bearing or the position of the speaker’s body. It is a more or less stable state and thus not to be confused with body gestures which are movements. Body posture can be characteristic and assumed for a special purpose or it can correspond to the normal expectations in the context of a particular situation. Obviously one can be lying down, seating, or standing. Normally, these are not the elements of posture that convey messages. However, when the speaker is slouched or erect, his or her legs crossed or arms folded, such postures convey a degree of formality or relaxation. Once more, they can also transfer symbolic messages on the orator’s attitude or intention with regard to the message.

3.5. Body gestures

A body gesture is a movement made with a limb, especially the hands, to express, confirm, emphasize or back up the speaker’s attitude or intention. This non-verbal activity is regularly used in oral discourse. If a body act requires no verbal accompaniment, it is called an “emblem”. Examples are: hand signals such as waving good-bye, the “V” for victory sign or the “high five” signalling victory. While some emblems, for example a clenched fist, have universal meaning, there are others that are idiosyncratic or culturally conditioned. The use of the zero shape made by the fingers, for instance, does not mean the same thing in different cultures. Standing for “OK” in the UK, it may be a vulgar expression in South American cultures, sometimes embarrassingly so. Body gestures are always perceived and interpreted together with facial expressions.

3.6. Facial expressions and eye movement

Facial expressions are dynamic features which communicate the speaker’s attitude, emotions, intentions, and so on. The face is the primary source of emotions. During oral communication, facial expressions change continually and are constantly monitored and interpreted by the receiver. Examples are: a smile, frown, raised eyebrow, yawn or sneer. 

Eye movement is a key part of facial behaviour because the eyes are invariably involved in facial displays. The different forms are observed to be cross-cultural. The frequency of eye contact may suggest either interest or boredom or may even betray dishonesty. The direct stare of the speaker can show candour or openness. Downward glances are generally associated with modesty; eyes rolled upwards are conveyed as a sign of fatigue. Researchers have discovered that certain facial areas reveal our emotional state better than others. For example the eyes tend to show happiness, sadness or even surprise. The lower face can also express happiness or surprise; a smile, for instance, can communicate friendliness or cooperation. As for the lower face, brows and forehead are known to reveal mostly anger.

3.7. Pause

A pause can have two different functions:

1. It can be a brief suspension of the voice to indicate the limits and relations of sentences and their parts. A pause then assumes a similar function in oral discourse to intonation (see chapter 3.1.).

2. It can consist of a temporary vocal inaction revealing the speaker’s uncertainty, hesitation, tension or uneasiness. In this context, a pause can also be judgmental by indicating favour or disfavour, agreement or disagreement. Consequently, the non-verbal cue of a pause can give rise to problems when interpreting it because its meaning can vary considerably. It can have a positive or negative influence on the process of communication.

4. Interpreting non-verbal communication

It has been stated that non-verbal communication plays a role in every kind of discourse, and in professional interpretation, it is crucial as well. This chapter discusses the following problems: in what situations and to what extent can the professional interpreter make sense of non-verbal communication? Where exactly in the brain is this interpretation of non-verbal communication located? For this chapter, websites were studied, since they are often more recent than books. Similar to the act of translation, the act of interpretation is influenced by many factors. This is why this chapter tries to give a different view by mentioning aspects from the fields of sociology, neurophysiology and psychology.

4.1. The importance of face-to-face situations

Non-verbal communication does not only play a role in face-to-face situations. It is also important in mediated communication, for example, as this is the case for telephone interpreting, where the interpreter does not see the speaker. Non-verbal communication is also crucial for every other kind of professional interpreting where the speaker cannot be seen. It is important, because even in such
situations the voice itself can express non-verbal paralinguistic messages. Those messages, for example, are intonation, tone of voice, vocally produced noises or pause (see chapter 3). Then again, it has to be considered that non-verbal, communicative acts might only be fully expressed and observed in face-to-face situations, where rhetorical sensitivity is accompanied by visually perceivable emotions. As a result, this chapter will mainly consider face-to-face situations.

4.2. The importance of a shared culture

The differences between the use of verbal elements and the use of non-verbal elements can be described as the difference between doing and communicating about doing. It is believed that non-verbal communication is continuous, while verbal communication is discontinuous. Furthermore, as we have seen, verbal activity never stands alone – it is always joined by non-verbal action. Non-verbal action can be dynamic and spontaneous, but usually it is patterned by the respective culture. A successful interpretation of non-verbal elements conveyed by the speaker requires the same understanding of the symbols shared between interpreter and speaker. That means, for the understanding and for the correct interpretation of an utterance and its simultaneously conveyed non-verbal elements, it is crucial that there is a shared knowledge of the rules and codes of non-verbal communication, which are embedded in the participants’ culture. Therefore, if the participants have a shared understanding of non-verbal meanings, the interpreter can also predict the non-verbal action of the speaker. Predictability is extremely important for interpreters. That is, thanks to the interpreters’ unconscious or conscious knowledge of the culturally determined non-verbal elements, they are able to predict what exactly is going to be said, or are able to detect the meaning in an early stage of the discourse. Thus, predictability of meaning in the field of interpretation is not only a result of the interpreter’s general culture, but also a result of his ability to interpret non-verbal communication.

4.3. Interpreting non-verbal elements: neurophysiologic aspects

What is the biological explanation for the process of interpreting non-verbal elements, for the interpretation of gestures or other signs, as well as for the supposition that this process happens even before the act of interpreting utterances? It has been proved that emotional areas of the brain fire up even as cognitive areas fire up when discussing emotional topics. That means that the emotional areas of an interpreter’s brain will work as well as the cognitive areas, when the interpreter listens to an angry speaker who raises his voice. Of course, “good” interpreters should not show emotions and must remain impartial. However, it is clear that they are not machines, but human beings who also feel emotions and who can detect those emotions which are embedded in non-verbal communication. But how do human beings feel emotions? What are the neurophysiologic conditions for this process? The right hemisphere of the brain is also called the emotional brain, or limbic system. It is the oldest part of the human’s brain, the size of a walnut. The prefrontal cortex is a part of the neocortex, the so-called thinking brain. The neocortex is responsible for analytic processes, comparisons or considerations, for problem-solving, planning, organisation and rational thought. It also processes emotionally relevant stimuli. Both prefrontal cortex and neocortex developed during the process of human evolution and are therefore younger than the limbic system. The prefrontal cortex as well as the neocortex interact with the evolutionary older limbic system. Part of the limbic system is called the amygdala.

The process of understanding non-verbal and verbal elements can be described as follows: Neural pathways bring information to the brain through the senses. Information entering through eyes or ears goes first to the thalamus, to the large part of the limbic system. The thalamus could be compared to a mail sorter. It decides to which parts of the brain to send the information. If the incoming information is emotional, the thalamus sends out two signals – the first to the amygdale and the second to the neocortex. As a result, the emotional brain, the limbic system, receives the information first. For the biological aspect of a species’ survival, here human beings, this point is very important: hypothetically, in the event of a crisis (attack of a wild animal, confrontation with an enemy etc.) the interpreter could react (flee or fight) before the thinking brain has even received the information and had a chance to weigh the options. Today, the interpreter must not fear to be confronted with such dangerous attacks or confrontations. Today’s interpreter can generally react in a “cooler” way than his or her ancestors. The amygdale and the rest of the limbic system is a remnant of times when emotions like anger or anxiety were much more useful to the survival of the species than nowadays. However, today, interpreters can be confronted with an angry speaker, on whom more or less violent body gestures can be observed (for example when he or she bangs a fist on the table). In consecutive interpretation, thanks to the limbic system, the interpreter experiences the anger first, can then analyse it, and express the message with less violent body gestures, but, with a severe tone of voice.

4.4. The role of emotional intelligence

The ability of interpreting the meaning of the discourse, the messages that the speaker truly wanted to convey, does not only concern the notion of Intelligence Quotient, but also the Emotional Quotient. The Emotional Quotient stands for emotional intelligence. People who are emotionally intelligent know their strong points and weaknesses. They are able to motivate themselves and others in negative situations. They can work in teams, have leadership-capacities, a good management of time and resources, and most important, they can detect and understand their own as well as other peoples’ emotions. The Emotional Quotient and the Intelligence Quotient are two different notions. However, in the act of interpreting, they join together. Thus, the interpretive process is not only a rational, cognitive activity, but also involves emotions, which are associated with ideas. Of course, interpreters can vary in their abilities to interpret human behaviour. It can be said that sometimes they lack emotional intelligence. Though, considering that people are deeply influenced by psychological, social, cultural processes, by gender, ethnicity and age, as well as by the media, interpreters should be aware of the hidden, inner dynamics that influence behaviours. Those who are able to think critically and to investigate the behaviour of the speaker are able to ferret out the nature of those symbols.

However, communicative behaviour can be studied and learned. Interpreters can become increasingly skilled at interpreting human
behaviour simply by keen observation. Furthermore, the more interpreters are mindful and pay attention to details and nuances in behaviour, to gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and body signals, the more they will detect the true meanings of the speaker’s discourse.

5. The transfer of non-verbal elements from the interpreter to the audience

As mentioned above, non-verbal communication is emotionally expressive as people from all cultures smile, cry, caress, or then repress their emotions through body or facial action. Many emotional expressions seem to be displayed universally. However, non-verbal behaviour varies from culture to culture, which means it is specific to each culture and may be interpreted differently.

What reactions do these non-verbal elements evoke among an audience when being transferred by an interpreter? Referring to the examples of non-verbal communication listed in chapter 3, the following text deals with the transfer and reception of such elements with special regard to cultural characteristics.

5.1. Intonation

Ideally, interpreters should reproduce the same intonation as the speaker. However, intonation is not always used correctly. For instance, the fact that simultaneous interpreters do not know how the speaker is going to proceed in his or her speech may lead the interpreters’ intonation to indicate their state of expectation. In that case, the voice tends to go up at the end of a sentence. In many languages, a rising intonation is a sign of surprise or a question, but when being used systematically by the interpreter it becomes very difficult for the audience to listen and understand where sentences begin and end, or to distinguish what is affirmative and what is interrogative.

Furthermore, interpreters should not emphasize words where there is no need for it. Especially in rather vacuous texts, the actual emptiness of the text is highlighted by stressing too many words and the interpreter will come across as a poor public speaker.

5.2. Tone of voice

The interpreters’ choice of the adequate tone of voice can give rise to serious problems. They can only be guided, in each case, by their tact and intuition. For example, an overreaction to being under pressure might manifest itself by an exaggerated attempt to sound calm. This can lead to a monotonous interpretation that sounds totally bored or even supercilious and will probably fail to communicate, as it might be rather irritating for the audience.

5.3. Vocally produced noises

Some speakers make use of vocally produced noises such as “eh” when they hesitate between two words or two sentences. Yet the interpreters should bear in mind that the use of these noises is not allowed in all languages. Therefore, they should only transmit what is part of the message.

5.4. Body posture

The simultaneous interpreters might not be able to reproduce the speaker’s body posture (for example, due to the positioning of the booth) whereas interpreters that are visible to the audience may do so. However, one must take into account that the audience usually looks at the speaker while listening to a simultaneous interpretation. In this case, there is a rather small need for the interpreter for transferring body gestures.

5.5. Body gestures

Body gestures can only be transferred if the interpreter is visible for the audience (see chapter 5.4.). Body gestures vary considerably according to cultural regions. A speaker, for example, agrees on a proposal - which is reproduced by the simultaneous interpreter - but shakes his or her head several times. This might be a sign of consent in the speaker’s culture. However, a European audience will consider this gesture as a sign of refusal and is probably confused not knowing, which information might be correct – the positive one (by the interpreter) or the apparent negative one (visually). If the simultaneous interpreters could express themselves visually, they would support the verbal reproduction of consent by nodding their head.

It is generally not recommended that interpreters imitate or exaggerate (striking) gestures as they run the risk to make fools of themselves.

5.6. Facial expressions and eye movement

Likewise, body gestures, facial expressions and eye movement differ from culture to culture. A speaker from a far Eastern country may report on a rather depressing subject but at the same time may be smiling or even laughing. Consequently, a European audience will be puzzled by these apparent contradictions. Once again, simultaneous interpreters are limited in their opportunities of cultural transfer for they cannot communicate visually in their booth and clarify the situation.

5.7. Pause

Appropriate pauses do add to the meaning of a speech and give interpreters time to gather their thoughts in order to provide a better interpretation. However, some interpreters may feel under pressure to keep up a continuous flow of sound. The interpreters think the audience will become impatient and lose confidence in them because the hearers seem to be missing something. Indeed, there are some people who encourage this belief, who turn round and frown or make gestures indicating they feel their headphones are
no longer working if they do not hear something for a few seconds.

**Conclusion**

Non-verbal communication is not only crucial in a plain daily communication situation but also for the interpreter. Non-verbal communication can take various forms, each of which illustrates or replaces a certain part of the verbal communication. It includes many more elements than one might think at first.

When interpreters are in a working situation where the audience will not see them, non-verbal communication can represent a problem. The audience might even be tempted to believe that the interpreters have not done a good job.

In order to be able to work properly, interpreters need to make sense of non-verbal cues. This is only possible because a special part of our brain deals with the emotional part of the message. Not only intelligence but also emotional intelligence is needed for interpreting non-verbal elements.

Whether non-verbal communication supports the interpreters in their task or presents a difficulty, it will always play an important role.

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