RETHINKING COHERENCE

Cristina NICOLAE [1]

Abstract

In teaching presentation skills to students, we have so many times come across the misconception that delivering a presentation is mostly (if not entirely) about verbal communication. Surprisingly enough, it is not. Presentations need to be perceived as dynamic, complex communicative events with an intended impact on their listeners and not as a monologue (which, by its nature, fails to reach the audience). We have decided to approach a certain property of discourse –coherence – and apply it to a broader context that would bring together the elements of this communicative event of delivering presentations.
The present paper tackles some of the most important extratextual elements that frame coherence, as we understand it.

Keywords: coherence, delivering presentations, posture, eye contact, proxemics, gesture, facial expressions.

The complexity of communication (be it written or oral, verbal or nonverbal) triggers changing boundaries in the understanding of coherence. This constitutive component of human communication (Dontcheva-Navratilova and Povolná ix) implies "a semantic property of discourse based on the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences" (Van Dijk 93), "interpretation" entailing the interaction between the reader and the text. Basically it refers to the extent to which the recipient (the listener/reader) manages to infer the communicative intentions of the sender (the speaker/writer). Lately, coherence has come to be viewed differently, transitioning from its previous understanding as a static component of the verbal discourse to the one that furthers it as a dynamic "cooperative achievement" rooted in the interaction between the speaker/writer and listener/reader.

> In recent years it has been possible to witness a considerable shift in the ways coherence is understood, namely a shift from a static text-based descriptive approach, according to which coherence is the product of textual connectivity and cohesion, to a more dynamic understanding, according to which coherence is conceptualized as a potentially variable cooperative achievement of the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader and can be seen as context-dependent, hearer/reader-oriented and comprehension-based, interpretative notion.
>
> (Bublitz qtd in Dontcheva-Navratilova and Povolná ix)

We address this dynamic concept by relating it to the act of delivering presentations in front of an audience, and the aspects we focus on belong to nonverbal and paraverbal communication, rather than to the verbal one.

The way in which speakers achieve coherence and the way listeners derive it from the oral discourse are conditioned by several factors which the one delivering the

[1] Assistant Prof. PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Târgu-Mureş.

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presentation needs to take into account: the verbal discourse, the nonverbal discourse (eye contact, gestures, posture, facial expressions, proxemics), paraverbal communication (stressing key-words, pace, pitch, tone, intonation, projecting voice, pauses, verbal mannerisms), visual aids (where one has to consider the appropriate choice of this kind of aids as well as their effective use).Hence, if these factors are properly dealt with, the manyfold manifestations of coherence converge into one meaningful, unified communicative event while all the-above-mentioned aspects become a sort of intermediator between the speaker (the intentional semantic information, the intended message) and the audience (the achieved semantic information, the message as understood).

Giving a speech should not be narrowed down to a sender-to-receiver information flow, but it should be viewed as an exchange of information between the participants since it allows immediate communication/interaction with the audience, not only the speaker being an essential "element" of this process (the focus being on him/her), but also the audience having to be given equal importance as they are the assessors, the ones that provide feedback and label one's presentation as successful or not. What is more, an effective speaker/communicator does not focus only on the content, the verbal discourse (the "what" of the presentation), but on the way in which the message is delivered (the "how" of a presentation) as well.

Researchers in the field have emphasized the importance of the three types of communication (verbal, nonverbal, paraverbal) and have insisted on the various degrees in which each of them influences the listeners. According to their findings"only seven percent of our credibility with listeners comes from the actual words we speak, while ninety-three percent of it comes from our vocal qualities and visual characteristics" (in Dale and Wolf 18). Furthermore, Mehrabian and Weiner's findings show that out of ninety-three percent, body language accounts for fifty-five percent while paralanguage accounts for thirty-eight percent of the information communicated to the listeners (in Tran and Stănciugelu 89).

Consequently, if the unity of the verbal language is given by textual cohesion and coherence, the unity of the *entire* communicative event of delivering presentations is the result of achieving coherence at verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal levels. In what follows, we shall tackle some of the most important aspects of nonverbal communication with the intent of increasing the readers'/students' awareness of their impact on communication in general, and on delivering presentations in particular.

Kinesics is defined as "the study of nonlinguistic bodily movements, such as gestures and facial expressions, as a systematic mode of communication"[2].Tran and Stănciugelu, among others, emphasize the fact thatnonverbal communication can reinforce the verbally-expressed message, it can support, block or even replace verbal communication (89). Moreover, body language influences our social existence, itmirrors how we feel about ourselves, tells the others about our self-esteem level,or it can be used

[2]http://www.thefreedictionary.com

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in such a way as to improve the individual's self-image, boosting their confidence. All these trigger a certain reaction on the part of the other participants in the communicative event, influencing their choice of a certain interpersonal communication style (assertive, aggressive or submissive).

When delivering a presentation, the speaker should be aware of the fact that the presentation begins even before (s)he utters a word , that is when the audience see him/her: based on the speaker's body language, they will form an impression about his/her level of confidence, professionalism, preparedness, hence credibility (Dale and Wolf 20). Body language should assist and not undermine the speaker, it should reinforce the message and not alter it, it should increase the impact of the speech on the audience and not diminish or even annihilate it. Which brings to our mind Billingham's words: "You are your most important visual aid" (47).

Posture sends information about one's social status [the one they have, think they have or want to have (Tran and Stănciugelu 94)], the level of confidence, attitude, emotional state.On one hand, good posture (spine straight, head erect, facing people so as to establish and maintain eye-contact,rotating shoulders back, not folding arms etc.) is "read" as a sign of confidence and commitment, of being in control of the situation, triggering credibility with the listeners, hence a positive attitude towards the speaker and the presentation. On the other hand, good posture boosts the speaker's/individual's confidence and improves voice quality, including how audible it is.

Eye contact. Generally perceived as the most important aspect of nonverbal communication, eye behaviour comes to be of crucial importance in effective communication, impacting the way in which the message is received and interpreted.It varies according to personality, sex, topic, setting, purpose of communication and cultural background.

Establishing and maintaining eye contact in communication (in our case, delivering a presentation) implies acknowledging the other's presence, signaling the intent to communicate, being open, honest, confident and in control of the situation. Avoiding eye contact is decoded as lack of interest, shyness, not being in control, dishonesty. The duration of the gaze is equally important as a too short gaze may be interpreted again as a lack of real interest whereas the opposite may signal either intimacy or aggression; Pease (178) suggests that one should decipher pupil signals in order to differentiate between the two: dilated pupils would indicate intimacy and constricted pupils show hostility.

When it comes to delivering presentations, establishing and maintaining eye contact proves once again fundamental in building the rapport between the speaker and the audience, in bridging the gap between them and perceiving this communicative event as a coherent, unfragmented one. On one hand, it allows the speaker to assess the audience's listening behavior, to get feedback on their understanding of and attitude towards the speech. On the other hand, it encourages them to pay attention to the speaker, to respond and to trust him/her as an effective communicator.

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The five-person trick is useful in making the audience feel included and in keeping them focused on the speech (Pease 188), which implies establishing eye contact with the person at each corner of the group and one in the middle.

Gestures & *proxemics* also have a word to say in achieving coherence at the level of spoken discourse. If generally referred to, gestures are open to cultural interpretation and are classified into five categories: emblems, illustrators, affective displays, regulators and adaptors (Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen's well-known classification). In terms of presentation skills, gestures may be used as a means of emphasis, of adding variety to the speech, of creating a visual image and reinforcing the message. However, too much use of gestures may be distracting and tiring for the audience and the speaker will appear as too nervous, disorganized, not in control.

Proxemics, or the way people perceive and make use of space in communication, is to be taken into account when delivering presentationsas well since it triggers a certain psychological reaction and influences communication. Proxemic behaviour (moving about when presenting, dominatingspace and making use of it) will help the speaker not only create a certain atmosphere, but also relax into the presentation.

Making one's movements definite (Billingham 85) is an aspect that the speaker needs to considerwhen the coherence of the presentation is brought into discussion. Ifmovements are not definite, our presentation lacks coherence in terms of nonverbal communication, in that the speech turns into a fragmented, gapped, difficult to follow attempt to communicate. Drawing a parallel between verbal and nonverbal communication, we may say that definite movements are like complete sentences that add their meaning tothe presentation as a whole, contributing to the coherence of the entire presentation, whereas movements that are not definite are like incomplete sentences, gaps that affect the unity of the spoken discourse.

Facial expressions represent another aspect of nonverbal communication that impacts the audience, thus bringing their share to the framing of coherence; they can be used as a means of emphasis, of reinforcing the message and of adding colour to the presentation. The speaker needs to be careful not to allow his/her facial expressions to show nervousness which might be understood as lack of confidence and preparedness, undermining his/her credibility with the audience. Basically, facial expressions should not alter, contradict or block the message, but reinforce it.

When considering paraverbal language, the issue we have decided to address is that of *vocal fillers*. Defined as words and sounds that do not convey meaning, expressions and noises that are not purposeful, filler words represent a vocal problem that might sabotage our presence in front of an audience, being perceived as distracting, irritating and unprofessional. Although they do not convey meaning, the occurrence of these distracting mannerisms can be decoded as a sign of nervousness, insufficient preparation of one's speech, not being in control of the presentation. They interrupt the communicative flow, affecting the coherence of the spoken discourse, to a certain extent preventing the audience from following the presentation and from understanding the message.

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All in all, we need to rethink coherence in the context of oral communication and see it as a dynamic, context-dependent discourse feature that brings together the elements of verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal communication.

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