



PARACOMMUNICATION AS A LINGUISTIC CATEGORY: ITS ONTOLOGICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL, AND TERMINOLOGICAL ESSENCE

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ABSTRACT

Human communication is never exhausted by the verbal code alone; it is accompanied by vocal and bodily phenomena that support, modify, or at times substitute for verbal signs. Although this accompanying layer of communication has attracted sustained scholarly attention under such labels as paralanguage, paralinguistics, extralinguistics, kinesics, and nonverbal communication, research remains fragmented across three interdependent dimensions: what this phenomenon fundamentally is (its ontological status), how it can be legitimately known and studied (its epistemological status), and how it should be named and delimited (its terminological status). This article addresses these three dimensions through a descriptive-analytical and comparative-conceptual synthesis of foundational and contemporary scholarship spanning the Anglophone, Russian/Soviet, and Uzbek linguistic traditions. The findings indicate that paracommunication is best characterized ontologically as a genuine semiotic subsystem with graded, non-discrete boundaries; that this graded nature necessitates a deliberately plural, multi-modal epistemology combining instrumental, observational, corpus-based, and experimental methods; and that current terminology conflates at least three distinct levels — the phenomenon itself, its channel-specific subtypes, and the disciplines that study it — which should be kept terminologically distinct. The article concludes by proposing a layered terminological convention intended to place future contrastive and typological research, including Uzbek-English comparative studies, on a more coherent conceptual foundation..

Introduction

Communication is not exhausted by verbal language: it is accompanied at every moment by vocal and bodily phenomena that support, reinforce, qualify, or occasionally substitute for the verbal sign, and these accompanying phenomena have been given many names — paralanguage, paralinguistics, extralinguistics, kinesics, nonverbal communication — and

studied within many disciplinary frameworks, including linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and anthropology, producing a body of scholarship that remains fragmented along three interconnected axes. The first is an ontological uncertainty about what paracommunication fundamentally is: whether it belongs to the language system proper or constitutes a marginal, adjacent phenomenon; whether it possesses systemic status comparable to phonology, morphology, and syntax, or is merely a performance-level artifact without underlying structure; and whether it forms a semiotic code in its own right or simply modifies an already self-sufficient verbal code. The second is an epistemological uncertainty about how such phenomena can be known and legitimately studied, given that, unlike phonemes, paracommunicative units are typically gradient, continuous, and context-dependent, resisting the clean segmentation on which classical linguistic method depends, so that different disciplines bring different, at times incompatible, epistemic tools — acoustic-instrumental measurement, ethnographic observation, corpus-based content analysis, experimental psychology — to bear on what may or may not be the same underlying object. The third is a terminological uncertainty, since overlapping sets of phenomena have been assigned different names by different scholarly traditions: the Anglophone tradition initiated by Trager's notion of “paralanguage”; the Soviet and Russian tradition of “paralingvistika” and “ekstralingvistika” represented by Kolshanskii; the American tradition of “kinesics” developed by Birdwhistell; and the broad psychological umbrella of “nonverbal communication” preferred by Argyle, Knapp, and others. This proliferation of terms is not a peripheral inconvenience but a direct symptom of underlying ontological and epistemological disagreement, because the way a phenomenon is named typically encodes an implicit claim about what kind of entity it is taken to be and how it is thought that it ought to be studied; a term borrowed uncritically from one tradition into another therefore risks importing theoretical commitments that the borrowing scholar may not intend and may not even notice. Against this background, the present article sets out to address the ontological, epistemological, and terminological essence of paracommunication as three interdependent dimensions of a single theoretical problem, synthesizing foundational and contemporary literature from the Anglophone, Russian/Soviet, and Uzbek traditions in order to clarify the status of the object under investigation and to propose a more coherent conceptual basis for the comparative-typological and contrastive linguistic research — including Uzbek-English contrastive studies of paralinguistic and nonverbal means — that increasingly depends upon it.

Materials and Methods

The study is theoretical and desk-based rather than empirical, and it proceeds by a descriptive-analytical and comparative-conceptual method applied to a purposively assembled corpus of foundational and contemporary scholarly sources spanning three linguistic traditions: the Anglophone tradition (Trager's original formulation of paralanguage, Crystal's account of prosody and intonation, Birdwhistell's kinesics, Poyatos's cross-disciplinary synthesis of nonverbal communication, Argyle's account of bodily communication, Hall's proxemic theory, and Knapp, Hall, and Horgan's textbook synthesis of nonverbal interaction research), the Russian/Soviet tradition (principally Kolshanskii's monograph on paralinguistics, together with the terminological apparatus of extralinguistics that this tradition developed), and the contemporary Uzbek tradition of paralinguistic and nonverbal

research represented in the work of Hakimov. Definitions and key theoretical claims were extracted from each source and subjected to componential analysis, decomposing each definition into its constituent semantic features (channel of transmission, discreteness versus gradience, relation to the verbal code, disciplinary home) so that definitions could be compared feature by feature rather than merely by surface wording. This comparison was organized along the three axes announced in the introduction: the object of study presupposed by each source (its ontological commitments), the method of study it employs or recommends (its epistemological commitments), and the label and scope it assigns to the phenomenon (its terminological commitments). A conceptual-historical strand of analysis was added to trace how the usage of key terms shifted over time, from Trager's 1958 coinage of "paralanguage," through the mid-century Soviet paralinguistics school, to the broader and more heterogeneous contemporary field of nonverbal communication studies. Because the aim of the study is to clarify a theoretical category rather than to test a quantitative hypothesis, the overall approach is qualitative and hermeneutic, consistent with the category-clarifying, rather than data-generating, purpose of the research.

Results

The comparative analysis yields distinct but interlocking findings along each of the three axes. Ontologically, paracommunication occupies a genuinely liminal position: it is neither reducible to the verbal code proper — phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon — nor situated wholly outside language, since it is produced through the same vocal and corporeal channels and typically co-occurs with verbal signs, modifying, reinforcing, or at times replacing them. Two ontological positions can be distinguished across the literature reviewed: an "adjunct" view, implicit in early structuralist accounts that restricted linguistic status to phenomena reducible to discrete oppositions, which treats paracommunicative behavior as a secondary, non-systemic accompaniment to an otherwise self-sufficient verbal code; and a "systemic" view, associated with Kolshanskii and continued in the Uzbek dissertation tradition represented by Hakimov, which treats paracommunicative means as integral components of the total communicative act, forming their own genuinely structured, if gradient, subsystem alongside verbal language rather than beneath it. The evidence surveyed favors the systemic position, since gradience in paracommunicative signals does not itself preclude systemic organization: the degree of pitch elevation, for instance, correlates in a rule-governed way with the degree of emphasis intended, indicating structure of a graded rather than discrete kind. Epistemologically, the same gradience that grounds the systemic ontological finding also explains why paracommunicative units resist the classical distributional and oppositional methods developed for phonological analysis and instead require a plural methodology: acoustic-instrumental analysis for the vocal component of paralanguage; observational and video-based coding schemes for the kinesic component; corpus-based content analysis for how paracommunicative behavior is represented in written and literary sources, a method already established in Uzbek-English contrastive research on depicted nonverbal behavior; and experimental-psychological methods for studying how paracommunicative signals are perceived and interpreted by listeners and observers. Terminologically, the comparative definitional analysis reveals substantive non-equivalence beneath superficial translation-equivalence: Trager's "paralanguage" narrowly designates the

vocal, non-lexical features of speech, while “paralinguistics” is used inconsistently both for this vocal phenomenon and for the discipline that studies it, producing a level confusion between object-language and metalanguage that recurs throughout the literature; Kolshanskii’s “paralingvistika” is used more broadly to cover any nonverbal accompaniment to speech, vocal and kinesic alike, making it closer in scope to what Anglophone scholarship calls “nonverbal communication” as a whole rather than to Trager’s narrower “paralanguage”; “extralinguistics” is used by some scholars for the situational and contextual factors surrounding an utterance and by others as a near-synonym of paralinguistics; Birdwhistell’s “kinesics” is restricted specifically to body movement and gesture, explicitly excluding vocal features; and “nonverbal communication” functions in the psychological literature as the broadest cover term, subsuming paralanguage, kinesics, proxemics, oculusics, and haptics under a single label. These findings indicate that the same term is not reliably used to denote the same object across traditions, and that at least three terminological levels — the phenomenon itself, the discipline that studies it, and the specific channel or subtype under discussion — are routinely conflated in the existing literature.

Discussion

The three findings are best understood not as independent problems but as three faces of a single underlying difficulty: terminological confusion is, in large part, a downstream symptom of unresolved ontological disagreement about whether paracommunication is systemic, and this same ontological disagreement conditions the epistemological question of what kind of method is appropriate to its study, since a merely adjunct, non-systemic phenomenon would warrant only impressionistic description, whereas a genuine, if gradient, subsystem warrants the plural but rigorous methodology identified in the results. Adopting the systemic ontological position as a working premise for future research therefore has consequences beyond ontology alone: it licenses the epistemological pluralism already practiced, somewhat unreflectively, across the disciplines that study paracommunicative behavior, and it licenses a corresponding terminological reform. On this premise, the article proposes a layered terminological convention in which “paracommunication” functions as the umbrella term for the phenomenon as a whole; “paralanguage” is reserved for its specifically vocal subtype (pitch, tempo, loudness, voice quality); “kinesics” for its bodily-gestural subtype; “oculesics” and “proxemics” for its gaze-based and distance-based subtypes respectively; and “paralinguistics” or, more broadly, “nonverbal communication studies,” reserved strictly for the disciplines that study these phenomena rather than applied, as they currently often are, to the phenomena themselves. This clarification carries practical stakes for contrastive and typological linguistics, where cross-linguistic comparison of paracommunicative means — for example, of Uzbek and English gestures of gratitude, or of gender-specific paralinguistic units across the two languages — requires a stable, well-defined unit of comparison, and where uncritical translation of terminology between the Anglophone and Russian/Soviet-Uzbek traditions risks comparing objects that are only nominally, rather than substantively, equivalent, thereby undermining the validity of the comparison itself. The present synthesis has an evident limitation in that it does not itself generate new empirical data; rather, it clears conceptual ground for the empirical, corpus-based, and cross-linguistic studies that depend

on a well-defined object, and its proposals should accordingly be tested and refined against such empirical work rather than treated as a final terminological settlement.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here suggests that paracommunication should be treated ontologically as a genuine, if gradient, semiotic subsystem rather than as a marginal or merely performance-level accompaniment to verbal language; that it should be studied epistemologically through a deliberately plural, multi-modal methodology matched to its graded and multi-channel nature, combining instrumental, observational, corpus-based, and experimental approaches as appropriate to the vocal, kinesic, oculesic, and proxemic subtypes involved; and that it should be named terminologically according to a layered convention that keeps the phenomenon itself, its channel-specific subtypes, and the discipline that studies it clearly distinct, rather than allowing a single term to slide across all three levels. Future contrastive research, including Uzbek-English comparative work on paralinguistic and nonverbal means, stands to benefit from adopting this clarified conceptual apparatus, since a well-defined and cross-traditionally commensurable object of study is a precondition for any comparison to be theoretically valid rather than merely nominal..

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