

What Is Paralanguage?

Paralanguage is a form of nonverbal communication that allows people to add layers of meaning to their spoken utterances through the manipulation of the manner of speech, or the way they say things. Paralanguage refers to the conveyance of meaning through non-lexical tokens (or non-words, such as "huh," "hmm," or "well") such as qualities of prosody (or the rhythm, stress, and sound of speech). Various aspects of linguistic communication are conveyed through different components of language, like words (lexemes), grammatical structure (morphosyntactics), and sound (phonology). These components, however, do not fully encapsulate the depth or nuance of human communication because the way we say things greatly influences how others interpret us. Paralanguage, therefore, is the term used to discuss these other vocal elements of communication that factor into our speech and interpretation. In other words, paralanguage refers to *how* something is said rather than focusing on *what* is said.

Because paralanguage refers to a broad category of meta-communicators, or secondary communicating functions, it includes many components. For example, volume is a component of paralanguage because it indicates important aspects about an utterance: Speaking louder commands attention, whereas speaking quieter can indicate discretion. It is also an important indicator for others to interpret the speaker because someone who talks quietly can be viewed as shy, or conversely, someone who always speaks loudly can be viewed as overly excited. Paralanguage can also engage in intonation, pitch, rhythm, pauses, or vocalic interjections. Many of these components are intentionally manipulated by a speaker to indicate their meaning, but paralanguage can also surface unintentionally.

Paralanguage is sometimes also called **vocalics** because it often involves vocal elements that fall outside the governance of phonology. In linguistics, phonology refers to the study of the structure of sound to convey meaning. Every spoken language contains sounds that carry meaning (phonemes) when assembled correctly. Paralinguistic communication, however, does not employ the normal phonemic systems of a language, and can even involve the violation of these sound rules. In this way, paralanguage is a form of **nonphonemic communication**: Paralanguage does not use the same phonemic structures to convey meaning. For example, the phrase "You like coffee" appears ambiguous when read, but if spoken with an upward intonation, it becomes a question: "You like coffee?" In English, using the upward intonation in a phrase like this conveys a question through the paralinguistic quality of changing the pitch at the end of the end of a semantically ambiguous phrase.



All speakers employ elements of paralinguistics to better express themselves and their intentions. Understanding the elements of language that transcend words and grammar establishes a more complete picture of how we communicate with one another.

First Known Use of Paralinguistics

Paralinguistics has presumably always existed as a mode of communication recognized and employed by in-group speakers of a language. It was first named paralinguistics by American linguist **George L. Trager** in his 1958 publication in *Studies in Linguistics*. "He developed this research while working at the Foreign Services Institute for the US Department of State after working for many years to unravel the deeply enmeshed nuance that appears in spoken communication. Understanding and employing appropriate paralinguistics communication is essential in successfully communicating with others from different backgrounds, and as a result, Trager's research in paralinguistics was influenced by his employment by the Department of State. The term itself combines "para" (meaning, adjacent to or beside) and "linguistics" to illustrate that this type of communication is tangential to speech.

Difference Between Paralinguistics and Paralinguistic

Paralinguistics and paralinguistic are two closely related terms that can appear interchangeable. **Paralinguistic communication** refers to all components of communication that convey meaning that are not standard speech. **Nonverbal communication** is another term for paralinguistic communication because it does not rely on the use of regular words. Paralinguistics is therefore a type of paralinguistic communication. Paralinguistics can refer specifically to the vocal but nonphonemic properties of speech, or it can include other elements of linguistic communication, like gestures and facial expressions. These physical paralinguistic communicators fall under **kinesics**, the subfield of linguistics that examines how meaning is

encoded through physical movements that relate to speech. While paralinguistics usually encompasses some physical communicators, it is not a complete term when discussing body language and kinesics is preferred. Generally, paralinguistics falls under the umbrella term paralinguistic communication. When examining an exchange in its entirety, paralinguistic communication also examines the social context, cultural context, use of space (also called proxemics), and speaker-listener roles. Paralinguistics itself only encapsulates some of these elements of paralinguistic communication as a whole, and is a somewhat more limited term.

Examples of Paralinguistics

There are many examples of paralinguistics, and the ones discussed here are those that apply to English. Some paralinguistic communicators are language dependent, meaning that they are directly linked to a language (e.g. different languages convey elements of irony or sarcasm using different methods), while others are more universal (e.g. in many languages a gasp indicates a surprise because it is a physiological response to pain). Some paralinguistic communicators are also dependent on a person's own anatomy and therefore differ between individuals (e.g. vocal pitch depends on the development of the voice box, giving children and adults with smaller voice boxes a higher pitch voice than those with larger ones). With this in mind, paralinguistics in English can look like:

- An audible gasp indicates surprise
- An audible sigh indicates frustration or listlessness
- The tokens "mm-hm" (to indicate agreement) or "mm-mm" (to indicate disagreement)
- Emphasis of a single word to alter the meaning of an entire phrase (emphasized token italicized): "I didn't say *she* took it" (meaning it was not specified that "she" was the actor) vs. "I didn't say she *took* it" (meaning her motives or actions are unclear)
- Pace of speech: Faster pace indicates excitement or nervousness; slower pace indicates boredom or uncertainty
- Pauses and hesitations that indicate uncertainty: Tokens sometimes called hedges (such as "um," "uh," or "mm" that allow a speaker to stall) and halting speech signal that a speaker does not know what they are talking about
- Physical communicators that indicate the underlying meaning of an utterance, such as a smile to indicate an association with positive emotions

Even though paralinguistics is most often vocalic and relates to spoken language, paralinguistics can also be indicated through other modes of communication. For example, a popular way to indicate actions in text is by using asterisks, which can indicate the same meanings carried out in spoken conversation. For example, the text "When I see headlines like this, I just *sigh*" indicates that the writer feels exhausted by seeing a certain type of news. Were this phrase spoken aloud, the meaning of the sigh would be consistent with this written form.