A Pragmatic Analysis of Proxemics as A Nonverbal Communicator with Reference to The Concept of Social Distancing During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The term ‘social distancing’ has been widely used recently in various means of mass communication to encourage people to keep it as a way of preventing the spread of Covid-19 Coronavirus. In addition to studies in natural sciences, the term ‘social distancing’ could also be explored in various research areas in humanities, including pragmatics, sociology, and psychology. This paper deals with the pragmatic reading of the term ‘social distancing’ with reference to proxemics as a nonverbal communicator to find out whether or not genuine social distancing could result in weakening ties among the members of any given community. By analyzing the connection between ‘social distancing’ and context, proxemics, spatial deixis, power and solidarity, the paper hypothesizes that the term ‘physical distancing’ is a more appropriate preventive approach to substitute for ‘social distancing’, while retaining social integration during the pandemic.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Nonverbal Communication, Proxemics, Social Distancing, Physical Distancing; Covid-19

1. Introduction

We, human beings, as the most rational known creatures so far, spend most of our life talking, listening and observing others communicating. Communication occupies a great part of our lives; hence it should be given its due attention in order to uncover the realities and aspects that distinguish it from other human activities. To study human communication, however, one needs to break it down into components and classify them in terms of form, nature and structure.

Generally speaking, communication consists of what we express and impart through words, i.e., verbal and what we express in the ‘unspoken’ mode. There is a plethora of studies on verbal communication covering most aspects and perspectives. But when it comes to nonverbal communication, there are limited studies. When we relate one type of nonverbal communication, namely ‘space’ or ‘proxemics’ from a pragmatic perspective, to the recent concept of ‘social distancing’ brought about by Covid-19 pandemic, research sums to almost zero. Hence, the rationale of this study.

This type of communication primarily carries more meaning than verbal communication. To Dr. Albert Mehrabian, nonverbal communication is 93% of overall daily communication. This high percentage displays that nonverbal communication is crucial in human's daily life. While communicating, human beings do not speak only with words; nonverbal messages convey more messages than talking. Thus, verbals and nonverbals work simultaneously in communication.

2. Pragmatics and Nonverbal Communication

It is a well-established fact that social interaction and social activities have become crucial psychological and physical health requirements for all ages. From early childhood, until

people get aged, they seek sociability. Deprivation from genuine social interaction and community networking changes human beings' basic definition from social beings to isolated creatures. The essential means of interaction is communication which could be verbal, nonverbal or a mixture of both.

Nonverbal communication refers to all the messages that are sent by an individual, except for words. Nonverbal communication could be manifested in several ways, including facial expressions, kinesics, proxemics, chronemics, physical appearance, artifacts, and touch. Nonverbal communication is, thus, the transfer of information through communication without words. Exploring nonverbal communication from a pragmatic standpoint is a significant, but not an easy, task.

Thomas (1995: 2) approaches pragmatics from a broad perspective without imposing her judgment on how and where the term fits. She highlights the available definitions of pragmatics in terms of the two prominent approaches, namely those connecting pragmatics to 'speaker meaning', and those connecting it to 'utterance interpretation'. She does not support either approach separately because prioritizing one over the other will be at the expense of canceling the significant role of the speaker or the hearer, respectively.

Allan et al. (2010: 67) define 'pragmatics' as 'the context-dependent assignment of meaning to language expressions used in acts of speaking and writing'. In their definition, they do not account for the nonverbal contribution in communication and only focus on the spoken and written versions of the language.

In a more comprehensive approach, Mey (2001: 6) defines pragmatics as the study of 'the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society'. In his approach, Mey highlights the term verbal and/or nonverbal 'human communication'. The main focus of this paper is the relationship between pragmatics and a type of nonverbal communication, namely 'proxemics' or 'space'.

2.2 Kinds of nonverbal communication

As for the kinds of nonverbal communication and what it includes, there are different views. To avoid unnecessary details, the essential types of nonverbal communication are summarized below (Anon,2020).

2.2.1 Facial Expressions

The expressiveness of the human face is evident for all people, as it can impart infinite emotions without uttering a word. Moreover, different from some other kinds of nonverbal communication, facial expressions are global and universal. Across the cultures, facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust are identical

2.2.2 Body movement and posture

Our movements and posture bear a large amount of information without uttering a single word. This wealth of information is conveyed without us noticing it. This includes the way we sit, walk and stand along with the body movements we make.

2.2.3 Gestures

Gestures are found in all parts of our daily lives. The gestures accompany our speaking, in most cases, it happens without thinking. Culture is very decisive here, as the meaning of some gestures are culture-specific; in other words, they can vary across cultures. Hence, it is vital to be cautious about how you employ gestures to avoid misunderstanding.

2.2.4 Eye contact

One of the most significant kinds of nonverbal communication is eye contact due to the fact that the sight has a great role in our lives. Affection, interest, attraction and hostility and many

other messages could be conveyed through the way we look at people. It is also significant for maintaining the flow of conversation.

2.2.5 Touch

Some part of communication could get through via touch. The way we touch others during communication acts such as handshakes and pads on the shoulder, and hugs could impart several messages.

2.2.6 Paralinguistic/Voice

The voice quality such as vocal tone, speed, pitch, volume, number and length of pauses, and disfluencies all convey hidden messages to the hearer and the listener. In addition, the tone of your voice vividly shows your real intent whether you are speaking sarcastically, with confidence, or affectionately.

2.2.7. Chronemics/Time

It is the investigation of the role of time plays in communication, i.e., how we manage and react to others' management of time in various terms, such as duration and punctuality.

2.2.8. Proxemics/Space

Anon (2020) points out that Physical space could communicate various messages such as intimacy, aggression or dominance. The messages communicated through physical space vary from one culture to another or one situation to another, and depend on the nature of the relation among the participants in the conversation act. This will be the focus of the analytical part of this paper due to the importance it has in communication during Covid-19 pandemic where there is much debate about 'social distancing'.

2.3 Functions of Nonverbals

Nonverbal communication can have various functions, but seven are very commonly cited, namely *Reinforcement, Substitution, Contradiction, Accentuation, Regulation, Complementing* and *Deceiving*. These functions can be of great help for speakers and listeners in grasping the hidden messages. Below, each function is only briefly identified for better understanding, since the paper does not explore the connection between social distancing and the functions in order not to derail from the pragmatic analysis of the concept. Wertheim (2021).

1. Reinforcement

One can use nonverbal communication to duplicate and support a verbal message. Nonverbal communication can make a spoken message clearer to avoid misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

2. Substitution

In some cases, a nonverbal response will be sufficient, so it substitutes the verbal one. It can be more expressive and meaningful than words.

3. Contradiction

Sometimes verbals and nonverbals send opposite messages. In this case, we have a contradiction function which results in mixed messages and causes confusion.

4. Accentuation

Sometimes, nonverbal communication can accentuate and emphasize a message and add power and intensity.

5. Regulation
The flow of conversations needs to be regulated and maintained; this can be done through nonverbal communication. This function guides us to take turns in speaking, without using any words, with no interruptions.
6. Complementing
The use of nonverbal illustrators such as tone of voice or facial expression reinforces a spoken idea, for example, pouting as you tell your friend that you cannot attend her party.

7. Deceiving
Wertheim(2021) remarks that Nonverbal cues can also be used to supplement an untrue message and make it believable or explore a lie.

2.4 Characteristics of nonverbal communication
There are many characteristics, but five of these characteristics of nonverbal communication are commonly referred to:

1. It occurs constantly.
2. It is context-based
3. It is more convincing compared to verbal communication.
4. It is a main device of expression.
5. It is culture-specific

Cultures contribute various views in nonverbal human behavior. For example, the forming of an O with index finger and thumb, which means OK or good work in America, may have insult meaning in other countries (Seiler, W.J. & Beall, M.L., 2011). Furthermore, Certain inborne behavior, smiling for instance, is a universal nonverbal cue providing people with a sign of friendly feeling.
To sum up, nonverbal communication occurs constantly; it is a non-stop process. For the interpretation of nonverbal communication, one needs to depend on the context. As for the truth conditions, usually nonverbal communication is more believable than words. Based on the research in the field of communication, nonverbal takes the lion's share. The meaning of nonverbal signs changes from a culture to another.

3. Proxemics and Types of Distance
To talk about ‘proxemics, in the field of nonverbal communication, we need to define it first. Proxemics is the ‘study of the use of space and the distance between individuals when communicating’ (Seiler & Beall, 2011: 130). According to Edward T. Hall’s four distance zones, the relationship between people can be classified into four groups namely intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance. Each zone has a different distance maintained (Altman, 1975).
The study and investigation of the influence of distance and space on communication is referred to as Proxemics. In General, space affects the way people converse and the way they behave consequently. To have a better understanding concerning how proxemics works in nonverbal communication, each type of distance will be identified separately:
To define ‘Personal Distance’, context, situation and relation need to be taken into consideration. Generally speaking, people are socialized into the norms of personal space within their cultural group. Scholars have identified four zones (Hall, 1968). In general, the four zones that constitute our personal space are: public zone (12 or more feet from our body), social zone (4–12 feet from our body), personal zone (1.5–4 feet from our body), and intimate zone (from body contact to 1.5 feet away).

3.1. Public Distance (12 Feet or More)
At around 12 feet from one person, pubic distance starts and extends out from that place on. This kind is the minimum personal among the zones that are used when an individual is

engaged in a formal communication act. It is typically moved away from the viewers in order to let them see; on when a public figure attempts to preserve such distance as an indicator of power or under security pretext.

3.2. Social Distance (4–12 Feet)

For professional and casual interaction and communication, 4-12 feet distance is employed. This kind of distance is favored in certain professional environments because it maintains appropriacy as per the communication setting.

3.3. Personal Distance (1.5–4 Feet)

Up to 4 feet from our body, boundaries of personal and intimate zone starts. It is usually kept for acquaintances, friends, and others. This zone is very common as most of our communication acts occur within this zone which starts from 1.5-4 feet. In case of getting very close to the addressee's body, one can always resort to using verbal cues to reassure them that their presence at this distance is only friendly and not intimate in any way. As it has been very widely used, it has been divided into at least two subzones which help us negotiate close interactions with people we may not be close to interpersonally (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995).

3.4. Intimate Distance

This intimate zone is reserved for only the closest friends, family, and romantic/intimate partners. Being close to someone and feeling their physical presence can be very comforting when words fail.

4. Social Distancing and Covid-19:

4.1 A Public Health Misconception:

According to United Nations World Health Organization's concrete protective measures from Covid-19, people must maintain a minimum of 1-meter distance to reduce the risk of infection when they cough, sneeze or speak. The instructions encourage people to maintain greater distance when indoors that may exceed 2-meter distance. (https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public)

Qureshi et al. (2020) state, "The 2-meter rule is based on an outdated dichotomy model which assumes viral transmission in either large droplets or small airborne particles." They point out that the transmission of viruses is rather more complex in reality, and hence the claimed rules for distancing have to be reconsidered in accordance with multiple factors, including viral load, ventilation, type of activity, home and outdoor settings, and masking. The current public view on distancing marks a simplified image of viral transfer and ignores the aforementioned factors, thus increasing the virus infection rate.

A detailed report entitled 'What is the evidence to support the 2-metre social distancing rule to reduce COVID-19 transmission?' by CEBM (The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine), which is affiliated to the University of Oxford, includes the following bullet points:

- Smaller airborne droplets laden with SARS-CoV-2 may spread up to 8 metres concentrated in exhaled air from infected individuals, even without background ventilation or airflow. Whilst there is limited direct evidence that live SARS-CoV-2 is significantly spread via this route, there is no direct evidence that it is *not* spread this way.
- The risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission falls as physical distance between people increases, so relaxing the distancing rules, particularly for indoor settings, might therefore risk an increase in infection rates. In some settings, even 2 metres may be too close.

4.2 Contextualism and Social Distancing:

Chapman (2011: 119) points out that contexualism covers a number of linguistic theories reinforcing the role of 'context' in communication. The three essential types or levels of context contribute to the felicity of a speech event, namely 'physical context' (objects in the communication, place, time, and subject matter of the speech event), 'linguistic context' (the preceding relevant parts of a conversation), and 'social context' (the main features of a social situation, including location, participants, their relationship, which may influence speaker's linguistic behavior and make him more or less sociable or isolated) (Trudgill 2003: 121). Emphasizing 'social distancing' reduces the role of physical context in pragmatics and social context in sociopragmatics, and may retain the linguistic context, which is a shared domain among several layers of linguistic analysis, mainly pragmatics, semantics and syntax.

On the other hand, Van Herk (2012: 33) divides isolation into three kinds: physical, linguistic and social. These may be manifested at the verbal and nonverbal domains of communications. As pointed out by Grundy (2000: 28), in verbal communication, the rate of distance between the speaker and the referent(s) would involve the selection of proper proximal demonstratives (this and these) and distal demonstrative (that and those). These will be interchangeably used when it comes to nonverbal reference to space and the four types of distance.

4.3. 'Social Distancing' and 'Spatial Deixis'

Spatial deixis is a major type of 'deictic expressions' in pragmatics, along with temporal deixis, social deixis, person deixis and discourse deixis (Birner 2013: 114, Vershueren 1999: 19, and Levinson 1983: 54). Spatial deixis is used to specify a location which is relative to the location of the speaker or the hearer (Birner 2013: 116).

The researchers think that social distancing may foster an imbalance in the use of the two prototypical cases of spatial deixis, namely *here* and *there*: the former as the main example of proximal deixis (indicating a location that is near the speaker) and the latter as the main example of distal deixis (indicating a location that is some distance from the speaker). However, the imbalance is not predicted to be in favor of either case of spatial deixis. Nonetheless, in case of expanding the use of 'physical distancing', the imbalance is expected to be in favor of the maximal use of distal deixis, since the interlocutors will be physically apart, while socially connected. Similarly, Vershueren (1999: 19) points out that the choice of certain words (for example, the verbs go and come) indicate movement away from or towards a spatial point of reference, respectively. He postulates, 'the relevance of space as a contextual correlate of adaptability stretchers beyond more spatial reference. (1999: 98)'.

4.4 'Social Distancing' Revisited

The term 'social distance' is the opposite of Brown and Gilman's (1960) 'solidarity factor' (Leech 1983: 126). It could be identified as a combination of several factors, namely status, age, sex, and degree of intimacy. Those factors determine the level of respectfulness in a speech event. Thus, feeling close and related to someone or similar to him/her in terms of age, social class, profession, occupation, sex, ethnic background, and/or common interest saves one from employing indirectness to make a request from the interlocutor, compared to another situation in which the hearer is a complete stranger (Thomas: 1995, 128).

Van Herk (2012: 37) signifies the role of what he labels 'cultural geographers' in distinguishing physical distance from social perceptions of distance. To him, distant locations that we have easy travelling access to, seem closer and less distant than areas that might be near on the map, but difficult to reach due to the lack of fast transportation facilities. Thus, physical and social barriers may encourage residents to remain within their own community. However, more substantial social barriers increase social isolation, whereas temporary physical barriers may enhance the need for social interaction. To Van Herk (2012: 38), the social and physical ideas of space will have an impact on verbal and nonverbal

communication. The social factors may even influence our understanding of distance and physical locations too.

In mathematical measures, the social distancing prescribed by United Nations World Health Organization begins with a minimum of 1-meter distance. From the Proxemics measures, social distance ranges between 4 to 12 feet (approximately 1.21 to 3.65 meters). This is still less than the genuine danger the transmission of the virus could cause, which may reach 8 meters. Hence, shifting the attention of people from 'Social Distancing' to 'Public Distancing' could be realized only through complete lockdowns.

4.5. Social Distancing and Solidarity

Thomas (1995: 129) postulates that the similarity between Power and Social Distance is so intense that certain studies in pragmatics have conflated the two. People tend to be socially distant from those in power or higher in the hierarchy. In support of this assumption, focusing on social distancing as a Covid-19 prevention measurement gradually increases the power ranges among the interlocutors, hence encouraging tougher social disconnection. Resultantly, 'solidarity' among interlocutors decreases with the increase of social distancing/power. Earlier, Leech (1983: 126) renamed the 'solidarity factor' in politeness as 'Social Distancing' to refer to the degree of respectfulness at a given speech situation. This hugely depends on permanent social factors, such as status, age, sex, and degree of intimacy. The temporary contextual role of the interlocutors influences the manifested solidarity, as in the case of teacher-student relationship or employer-employee communication.

4.6. The Alternate

During crises and hard times, people need to be socially integrated. They need to take care of one another, maximize social solidarity and minimize power and social hierarchy. 'Social Distancing', both as an abstract term and a concrete fact, supports the unpleasant social disconnection. Amid the current Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, more physical disconnection and stronger social solidarity are required. The pragmatic interpretation of 'context' needs to be reformed, and new pragmatic definitions of 'context', 'spatial deixis', 'politeness' and other relevant pragmatic and linguistic concepts and principles have to be postulated. This paper suggests replacing the term 'social distancing' with 'physical distancing' in all mass communications and Covid-19 prevention announcements. The researchers also initiate adding 'physical distance' as another type of distance under proxemics, specifically between social distance and public distance.

5. Conclusions

This paper concludes the following:

1. Using 'Social Distancing' as a widespread global term for fighting the spread of Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic is not an adequate term, and may result in unpleasant social disconnection in both short and long terms. Alternatively, the paper supports the use of 'physical distancing' to indicate that people need to be physically disconnected, yet socially integrated. This increases social solidarity and helps healing people's phobia from the pandemic. 'Physical Distancing' is way better than 'Social Distancing' from pragmatic, social, and psychological dimensions.
2. Adapting the term 'physical distancing' may reduce the use of proximal deixis 'here' and its affiliates, and increase the use of distal deixis 'there' and its affiliates in communication. Similarly, proximal demonstratives 'this and these' are expected to decrease, whereas the use of distant demonstratives 'that and those' is expected to increase, which mark the continuity of social integration with minimized physical contact.

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تحليل تداولي عن (المسافة) في التواصل غير اللفظي بالأشارة الى مفهوم (التباعد الأجتماعي) اثناء انتشار وباء كورنا - كوفيد ١٩

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ملخص

تم استخدام مصطلح 'التباعد الاجتماعي' على نطاق واسع مؤخرًا في مختلف وسائل الاتصال الجماهيري لتشجيع الناس على الألتزام به كوسيلة لمنع انتشار فيروس كورونا. بالإضافة إلى الدراسات في العلوم الطبيعية، يمكن أيضًا التحقق من مصطلح 'التباعد الاجتماعي' في مجالات مختلفة من العلوم الإنسانية؛ بما في ذلك التداولية وعلم الاجتماع وعلم النفس. يتناول هذا البحث مصطلح "التباعد الاجتماعي" في منظور تداولي بالإشارة إلى عنصر المكان كنوع من أنواع التواصل غير اللفظي لمعرفة ما إذا كان التباعد الاجتماعي الحقيقي يمكن أن يؤدي إلى إضعاف الروابط و علاقات الاجتماعية بين أعضاء أي مجتمع معين أم لا. من خلال تحليل العلاقة بين 'التباعد الاجتماعي' والسياق؛ وعنصر المكان، والتكوين المكاني؛ والقوة والتضامن؛ يطرح البحث فرضية تشير الى أن مصطلح 'التباعد الجسدي' هو نهج وقائي أكثر ملاءمة ليحل محل 'التباعد الاجتماعي'، للاحتفاظ بالتكامل الاجتماعي في الاوقات الصعبة، و لاسيما في حال انتشار الأوبئة.

الكلمات الدالة: التواصل غير اللفظي , التباعد الأجتماعي , كورنا - كوفيد ١٩.

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پوختە

پوختەزاراوەی (دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی) بە پانتاییەکی فراوان لە هۆیەکانی پەیوەندیکردن بەکاردەهێنریت بۆ هاندانی خەڵکی تا خۆیان بپارێزن لە توشبوون و بڵاوکردنەوەی ڤایرۆسی کۆرۆنای کۆڤید ١٩. شانبەشانی توێژینەوە لە زانستە سروشتیەکان، زاراوەی (دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی) بابەتێکی دەوڵەمەندە بۆ ئەنجامدانی توێژینەوە لە بواری زانستە مرۆڤایەتیەکانی وك پراگماتیکس و کۆمەڵناسی و سایکۆلۆجی. ئەم توێژینەوەیە خوێندنەوەیەکە لە چوارچێوەی زانستی پراگماتیکسەوە بۆ زاراوەی (دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی) بە ئاماژە بە چەمکی مەودا وەك یەکێك لە جۆرەکانی ئاخاوتنی نازارەکی بە مەبەستی هەڵسەنگاندنی زارەوەی (دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی) و کاریگەری لەسەر لاوازکردنی پەیوەندییە کۆمەڵایەتیەکان. لە ڕێگەی ڕاڤەکردنی پەیوەندی نێوان (دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی) و هەریەك لە بەکارهێنانی کۆنتێکست و مەودا و ئاماژەی شوێن و هێز و پەیوەندی کۆمەڵایەتی؛ توێژینەوەکە گریمانەی ئەوە دەکات کە زاراوەی (دورکەوتنەوەی جەستەیی یان فیزیکیی) گونجاوترین جێگرەوەیە بۆ زاراوەی (دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی)، کە لە کاتێکدا ئاماژەیە بۆ لە خۆپاراستن توشبوون و بڵاوکردنەوەی ڤایرۆسی کۆرۆنا، لە هەمان کاتدا پەیوەندییە کۆمەڵایەتیەکان بە بەهێزی دەهێڵێتەوە.

وشە کلیلییەکان: پەیوەندی نازارەکیی ، دورکەوتنەوەی کۆمەڵایەتی ، کۆرۆنای کۆڤید ١٩.