

Non-verbal Communication in Selected TED Talks

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ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se zabývá neverbální komunikací a zkoumá její význam a dopad ve veřejných projevech. Porovnává dva řečníky TED Talks – Tima Urbana a Adama Granta a zkoumá jejich využití vokálních a nevokálních prostředků. Teoretická část se zaměřuje na paralingvistické prvky: rychlost řeči, hlasitost řeči a tón hlasu. Dále také na nevokální prostředky jako je postavení těla, gesta, mimika, oční kontakt a celkový vzhled mluvčích. Porovnáním neverbálních prvků tato práce objasňuje efektivní komunikační techniky a jejich efekt na publikum, čímž přispívá k hlubšímu porozumění neverbální komunikaci ve veřejném projevu.

Klíčová slova: neverbální komunikace, vokální prostředky, paralingvistika, nevokální prostředky, TED Talks, veřejný projev, rychlost řeči, hlasitost řeči, tón hlasu, postavení těla, gesta, mimika, oční kontakt.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores non-verbal communication and its significance and impact within public speaking contexts. Through an analysis of vocal and non-vocal aspects, the study examines the communication strategies employed by speakers in two TED Talks. The theoretical framework deals with speech rate, volume, pitch, posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and overall appearance. By comparing and contrasting the non-verbal cues shown by the speakers Tim Urban and Adam Grant, the research explains effective communication techniques and their resonance with audience, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of non-verbal communication in public speaking discourse.

Keywords: non-verbal communication, vocal aspects, paralanguage, non-vocal aspects, TED Talks, public speaking, speech rate, volume, pitch, posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact.

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is a process encompassing both verbal and non-verbal elements. While verbal communication relies on language and words, non-verbal communication plays a crucial role in conveying meaning, emotions, and intentions through posture, gestures, facial expressions, and other non-verbal cues. This bachelor's thesis aims to explore the complexity of non-verbal communication, focusing particularly on vocal and non-vocal aspects, through an analysis of two TED Talks.

The theoretical framework begins with an overview of non-verbal communication, defining its significance and outlining various components. It explores basic vocal aspects such as speech rate, volume, and pitch, examining how these elements contribute to communication dynamics. Subsequently, non-vocal aspects including posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, social distance, touch, and overall appearance are discussed in detail, enlightening their roles in conveying messages.

The analysis section applies the theoretical framework to analyze the non-verbal communication in two TED Talks: Tim Urban's talk called "Inside the mind of a master procrastinator" with over 70 million views, and Adam Grant's talk called "The surprising habits of original thinkers" with over 21 million views. Through a systematic examination of vocal and non-vocal cues shown by the speakers, the research aims to uncover patterns, similarities, and differences in their communication styles.

By comparing and contrasting the non-verbal communication strategies employed by Tim Urban and Adam Grant, this study seeks to provide insights into effective communication techniques and their impact on audience engagement and perception. Ultimately, the findings aim to contribute to the understanding of the dynamics of non-verbal communication in public speaking contexts.

**I. THEORY AND INTRODUCTION
TO NON-VERBAL COMMUNICA-
TION**

1 DEFINING NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Wilson defines communication as a behavior of one individual influencing the behavior of another person.¹ There are two primary types of communication: verbal and non-verbal. Non-verbal communication, as defined in the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, refers to the transmission of information without the use of words.² Non-verbal communication has been described as actions expressed through facial expressions, body movements and vocal tones, excluding the verbal content, i.e., the use of actual words with lexical or semantic meaning.

Nevertheless, some theorists do not limit the characterization of non-verbal communication merely as everything excluding words. According to the psychologists Judith A. Hall, Terrence G. Horgan, and Nora A. Murphy, the relationship between non-verbal and verbal aspects of speech is closely connected to how thoughts and language work for the person delivering the message (sender) and how the person receiving the message (perceiver) interprets and makes inferences based on both verbal and non-verbal cues.³ Therefore it is often necessary to examine both non-verbal and verbal aspects together to grasp the intended meaning. A more comprehensive examination of interrelated aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication is beyond the scope of this bachelor's thesis, however, and the focus will be on non-verbal cues and other strategies. The content of verbal messages will only be introduced to compare or contrast the messages to the meaning communicated by non-verbal techniques.

Leaving aside cases in which the receiver is the visually impaired in some way or the communicator cannot be seen (such as radio or podcasts), it is impossible for a person to convey a message without emitting non-verbal signals to the receiver during communication.⁴ In fact, when the speaker is attempting to eliminate gestures or any movement whatsoever (for example, when the speaker is very nervous), this is not only immediately noticeable and calls attention to itself, but also emits non-verbal signals which may mitigate the spoken message. Nevertheless, distinguishing between unconscious signs and well-prepared

¹ William R. Wilson, "Feeling More than We Can Know: Exposure Effects Without Learning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 6 (1979): 811, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.37.6.811>.

² "Nonverbal Communication," *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed January 26, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/nonverbal-communication>.

³ Judith A. Hall, Terrence G. Horgan, and Nora A. Murphy, "Nonverbal Communication," *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019): 272.

⁴ Deepika Phutela, "The Importance of Non-verbal Communication," *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills* IX, no. 4 (2015): 45.

signals is difficult. Without considering these facts, it is impossible to fully understand non-verbal communication.⁵

According to numerous studies, the importance of actual words in communication varies in different situations and contexts. Raymond Hull, professor of communication sciences and disorders, reports that the research consensus is generally that the impact of the use of actual words in communication is about 20 percent, while the remaining 80 percent is influenced by non-verbal communication.⁶ However, another study by an academic researcher Deepika Phutela suggests that the impact of actual words is only 7 percent, and the rest of a message is delivered through non-verbal cues (38 percent through “the way a person speaks” and 55 percent through body language).⁷ Despite some variations, both studies mentioned agree that verbal communication represents only a small percentage compared to the broader significance of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication contributes greatly to the impression people form when encountering someone in person for the first time. These first impressions tend to be lasting and difficult to change later in time. In his research professor Raymond Hull, emphasizes the significance of what is known as “the two-minute rule,” which suggests that the initial period of two minutes after meeting a person is crucial for evaluating them.⁸

⁵ Judith A. Hall, Terrence G. Horgan, and Nora A. Murphy, “Nonverbal Communication,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019): 274.

⁶ Raymond H. Hull, “The Art of Nonverbal Communication in Practice,” *The Hearing Journal* 69, no. 5 (May 2016): 22.

⁷ Deepika Phutela, “The Importance of Non-verbal Communication,” *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills* IX, no. 4 (2015): 45.

⁸ Raymond H. Hull, “The Art of Nonverbal Communication in Practice,” *The Hearing Journal* 69, no. 5 (May 2016): 22.

2 VOCAL ASPECTS

As indicated, vocal aspects of a speech are part of a non-verbal communication taking up to 38% from a speaker's overall impression.⁹ These aspects are sometimes referred to as para-language. This discipline will be introduced to compare with the information communicated in the verbal content. For this purpose, it is important to clearly define the characteristics of vocal communication as defined by experts. According to Richard G. Jones Jr., professor of communication studies, there are three tools a speaker can use to make their speech more engaging. These are rate, volume, and pitch.¹⁰

2.1 Rate

Rate refers to the speed at which a person speaks. According to the American research and educational organization National Center for Voice and Speech, the average speaking rate is from 100 to 150 words per minute when presenting which is about the same as in regular conversations.¹¹ On average, this rate applies to English speakers in the US, with the maximum speech rate to be comfortably understandable at 150 words per minute.¹² However, a slower rate can be effective when trying to highlight important points. Jayne Latz, president of business communications skills training firm Corporate Speech Solutions, also recommends using a "strategic pause" before keywords.¹³ Nevertheless, holding breath or breathing heavily might be a sign of experiencing fear which contrastingly does not support a speaker's message.¹⁴

⁹ Deepika Phutela, "The Importance of Non-verbal Communication," *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills* IX, no. 4 (2015): 45.

¹⁰ "Communication in the Real World: 10.3 Vocal Delivery," University of Minnesota, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/chapter/10-3-vocal-delivery/>.

¹¹ "Average Speaking Rate and Words per Minute," VirtualSpeech, last modified November 8, 2022, <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/average-speaking-rate-words-per-minute>.

¹² "Average Speaking Rate and Words per Minute," VirtualSpeech, last modified November 8, 2022, <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/average-speaking-rate-words-per-minute>.

¹³ Sue Shellenbarger, "How to Improve Your Public Speaking: Can You Make the Tone and Pitch of Your Voice Better?" *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-improve-your-public-speaking-can-you-make/docview/1688764170/se-2>.

¹⁴ Fatik Baran Mandal, "Nonverbal Communication in Humans," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 24, no. 4 (April 2014): 419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288>.

2.2 Volume

Volume is a measure of how loud or soft a speaker's voice is when delivering a message.¹⁵ Effective use of volume is crucial in various communication settings, such as public speaking and presentations. Speakers adjust their volume based on the size of the audience, the technology involved or the acoustics of the place the communication takes place, the distance between them and the listeners, and the nature of the message.¹⁶

Strategic use of volume can significantly enhance communication by highlighting key points, conveying emotions, and keeping the audience engaged during a speech or presentation. However, speaking in soft volume during the whole speech might come across as "meek" to the audience, while using a loud volume throughout could be perceived as "overbearing or annoying."¹⁷ As suggested by George Mason University's Communication Center, varying volume levels to emphasize essential information is the most effective method. A softer voice for a short period of time draws listeners in, while increased volume serves to emphasize critical details.¹⁸

2.3 Pitch

Pitch refers to the highness or lowness of a person's voice while speaking. It is important to note, that men naturally have a lower pitched voice than women.¹⁹ Jayne Latz, speech-language pathologist, recommends making changes in pitch and volume to highlight the keywords of one's speech.²⁰ One technique is recommended by Lynda Waltner Stucky, a voice-branding specialist, who advises using voice to sound like a siren, going up and down on a scale.²¹ This technique is crucial when wanting to keep the attention of an audience. Lack of variation in rising and falling can result in monotonous delivery, leading to decreased

¹⁵ "Communication in the Real World: 10.3 Vocal Delivery," University of Minnesota, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/chapter/10-3-vocal-delivery/>.

¹⁶ "Finding the Right Speaking Volume," Scott Schwertly, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://ethos3.com/finding-the-right-speaking-volume/>

¹⁷ "Communication in the Real World: 10.3 Vocal Delivery," University of Minnesota, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/chapter/10-3-vocal-delivery/>.

¹⁸ "Volume," Communication Center, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://communicationcenter.gmu.edu/communication-resources/volume>.

¹⁹ "Vocal Variety," Communication Center, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://communicationcenter.gmu.edu/communication-resources/vocal-variety>.

²⁰ Sue Shellenbarger, "How to Improve Your Public Speaking: Can You Make the Tone and Pitch of Your Voice Better?" *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-improve-your-public-speaking-can-you-make/docview/1688764170/se-2>.

²¹ Sue Shellenbarger, "How to Improve Your Public Speaking: Can You Make the Tone and Pitch of Your Voice Better?" *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-improve-your-public-speaking-can-you-make/docview/1688764170/se-2>.

audience attention. On the other hand, always using an extremely high-pitched voice may signal a lack of confidence or tension.²² Research conducted by communication and public speaking specialists Emma Rodero, Olatz Larrea, Isabel Rodríguez-De-Dios, and Ignacio Lucas highlights the significance of moderate use of variation. Excessive modulation can overwhelm, while insufficient modulation may fail to captivate the audience effectively.²³ As with all of these qualities of spoken communication, variation and dynamics in what is called “vocal variety”²⁴ or “vocalics”²⁵ work to maintain an audience’s attention.

²² Lillian Glass, *The Body Language of Liars: From Little White Lies to Pathological Deception: How to See Through the Fibs, Frauds, and Falsehoods People Tell You Every Day* (Pompton Plains: Career Press, 2014), 134.

²³ Emma Rodero, Olatz Larrea, Isabel Rodríguez-De-Dios, and Ignacio Lucas, “The Expressive Balance Effect: Perception and Physiological Responses of Prosody and Gestures,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 41, no. 6 (February 2022): 659–684, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X221078317>.

²⁴ “Communication in the Real World: 10.3 Vocal Delivery,” University of Minnesota, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/chapter/10-3-vocal-delivery/>.

²⁵ “Verbal Communication: The Power of Using Words Effectively,” GGI Insights, accessed March 19, 2023, <https://www.graygroupintl.com/blog/verbal-communication>.

3 NON-VOCAL ASPECTS

The use of one's body can communicate four different ideas: it can repeat, contradict, replace, or enhance what is being said verbally.²⁶ Non-verbal communication utilizes various channels to convey messages without the use of words. The basic channels exploring non-verbal non-vocal communication include posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, social distance, touch and overall appearance.

3.1 Posture

One factor revealing what Professor Smith refers to as “true feelings” of an individual is their overall posture. As body language expert Joe Navarro stated “The spread of the legs transmits clearly a sense of confidence.”²⁷ In order to appear confident and comfortable there is a recommended distance between one's legs of about 18 inches. Standing with the feet too far apart is a pose suggesting an attack or confrontation, whereas having both feet closely together might give the impression that the speaker is on a edge of losing balance.²⁸ When a person stands with his legs crossed that is a signal of comfort. However, if someone makes an individual feel even slightly uncomfortable, the person may swiftly uncross their legs. This action is seen as a way to create distance or defend themselves from the person causing discomfort.²⁹

To create a comforting atmosphere, an individual must appear calm, as when nervousness and stress is visible, the audience most likely feels the tension and will likely reflect it back in their own body language, compounding the uncomfortableness of the speaker.³⁰ In order to appear confident and in power, humans use wide open postures in which they extend their limbs, neck, etc. to make themselves visually larger. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy refers to this as the “power pose,” which can take on various forms. This might include standing with legs spread out and arms raised above the head, with the neck extended to raise the height of the head. Alternatively, it could involve sitting with legs lifted onto a table,

²⁶ Deepika Phutela, “The Importance of Non-verbal Communication,” *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills* IX, no. 4 (2015): 45.

²⁷ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 98.

²⁸ Raymond H. Hull, “The Art of Nonverbal Communication in Practice,” *The Hearing Journal* 69, no. 5 (May 2016): 24.

²⁹ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 101.

³⁰ Raymond H. Hull, “The Art of Nonverbal Communication in Practice,” *The Hearing Journal* 69, no. 5 (May 2016): 22.

hands behind the head, and elbows outstretched. In her research, Cuddy has determined that performing this “power posture” on one’s own for 2 minutes before an important speech or job interview can increase the person’s testosterone level as well as decrease the level of cortisol, a hormone which produces stress.³¹

3.2 Gestures

Gestures are almost always essential for highlighting important information.³² According to evolutionary biologist Fatik Baran Mandal, individuals with self-confidence often use “flamboyant” gestures.³³ This is particularly noticeable among great speakers, who use gestures very often.³⁴ While those who are insecure or humble tend to maintain a reserved demeanor, similar to people experiencing fear, who may commonly have their hands clasped or placed them in front of their body.³⁵

It is important to note that some non-verbal signals might be associated with different meanings when it comes to different cultures. For example: spitting at someone would be in North America and Europe considered offensive. In Kenya, however, spitting at newborns or brides is considered to be a blessing. These gestures, called emblems, take only a small part considering the whole non-verbal communication.³⁶ Therefore it will not be discussed in this bachelor’s thesis.

According to a psychologist specializing in psycholinguistics David McNeill, gestures can be divided into four categories: deictic, iconic, metaphoric, and beat. Gestures known as “deictic” are used to draw attention to a particular object, location, person, or idea. Deictic gestures help in providing directional information, helping the listener to understand the specific target of the gesture.³⁷ According to Joe Navarro, it is considered more appropriate to

³¹ Dana R. Carney, Amy J.C. Cuddy, and Andy J. Yap, “Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 10 (2010): 1363–1368, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610383437>.

³² Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 69.

³³ Fatik Baran Mandal, “Nonverbal Communication in Humans,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 24, no. 4 (April 2014): 419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288>.

³⁴ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 81.

³⁵ Fatik Baran Mandal, “Nonverbal Communication in Humans,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 24, no. 4 (April 2014): 419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288>.

³⁶ Judith A. Hall, Terrence G. Horgan, and Nora A. Murphy, “Nonverbal Communication,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, (2019): 272.

³⁷ David McNeill, *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), quoted in Elizabeth Austin, and Naomi Sweller, *Presentation and Production: The Role of Gesture in Spatial Communication* (Boca Raton: Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 2014), 93.

point with the full hand rather than using a finger when employing deictic gestures.³⁸ Iconic gestures are physical movements of the hands that visually represent the characteristics of the object, action, or concept being referred to. For example, creating a rectangle shape with hand gestures while saying the word “box.” Iconic gestures are often used to enhance verbal communication.³⁹

Metaphoric gestures are also used to create a visual representation, but of abstract concepts. For example, open hand movements moving upward, as if showing the growth of something over time, can be a metaphor for progress or success.

Beat gestures involve rhythmic and repetitive hand movements that accompany speech. Unlike deictic, iconic, or metaphoric gestures that convey specific meanings related to words or concepts, beat gestures typically carry no specific meaning on their own, but contribute to the overall expressiveness and emphasis of spoken communication.⁴⁰

3.3 Facial Expressions

Evolutionary and social psychologist Paul Ekman has described how the “human face has twenty distinct muscle groups which are able to create more than four thousand expressions.”⁴¹ While the body language analyst indeed needs to know the speaker within their “calm environment” in order to be able to recognize changes in their face, the tension in a person’s forehead during stress can be noticed even by non-experts, i.e. by the general public. Wrinkles appearing on a person’s forehead are generally associated with uncertainty, unease, or concern.⁴²

One muscle around a person’s nose called the nasalis is highly sensitive to negative emotions. When a person hears, smells, or sees something unappealing this muscle uncontrollably reveals one’s opinion or sensation by wrinkling upwards. On the other hand, when

³⁸ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 81.

³⁹ David McNeill, *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), quoted in Elizabeth Austin, and Naomi Sweller, *Presentation and Production: The Role of Gesture in Spatial Communication* (Boca Raton: Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 2014), 93.

⁴⁰ David McNeill, *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), quoted in Elizabeth Austin, and Naomi Sweller, *Presentation and Production: The Role of Gesture in Spatial Communication* (Boca Raton: Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 2014), 93.

⁴¹ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 17.

⁴² Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 17.

this muscle does not wrinkle upwards but the whole head turns while the nose is pointing upwards, this might be a signal of confidence, dominance, or arrogance.⁴³

3.1 Eye Contact

As described by the Ancient Roman philosopher and orator Cicero, “the eyes are the mirror to the soul.”⁴⁴ A person is able to read emotions through another person’s eyes.⁴⁵ The study of “eye behavior” is known as oculusics. Eye contact with an audience is very important, although it must be made with the right frequency. Direct eye contact from eyes to eyes may be too intimate, therefore Professor Raymond Hull recommends looking at people’s noses. This way the person being viewed feels included, but they are not potentially made uncomfortable by too much unintended intimacy.⁴⁶

The blink rate of a person varies depending on several circumstances. The average is between sixteen and twenty blinks per minute, but people looking at a computer will have a lower blink rate than people working in a dusty environment, who will have the blink rate higher than average.⁴⁷ Taking this into consideration, frequent blinking may suggest fear, stress, or tension. Body language expert Dr. Lillian Glass assumes that this may be a sign that a person is lying, as when someone intentionally lies, they fear getting caught in the deception.⁴⁸

3.2 Social Distance

The concept of proxemics deals with the dynamics of personal space and the distance individuals perceive as necessary between themselves and others. It explores the ways in which people establish spatial boundaries, influencing interpersonal interactions.⁴⁹ While

⁴³ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 35.

⁴⁴ Gregory Titelman, *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs & Sayings* (New York: Random House, 1996), 94.

⁴⁵ Deepika Phutela, “The Importance of Non-verbal Communication,” *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills* IX, no. 4 (2015): 45.

⁴⁶ Raymond H. Hull, “The Art of Nonverbal Communication in Practice,” *The Hearing Journal* 69, no. 5 (May 2016): 24.

⁴⁷ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 23.

⁴⁸ Lillian Glass, *The Body Language of Liars: From Little White Lies to Pathological Deception: How to See Through the Fibs, Frauds, and Falsehoods People Tell You Every Day* (Pompton Plains: Career Press, 2014), 114.

⁴⁹ Andrea Morales, “Proxemics in Communication: Definition & Examples,” last modified November 21, 2023, <https://study.com/learn/lesson/proxemics-communication-examples.html>.

proxemics carries significance in various social contexts, its relevance in public speaking is considered limited, therefore it will not be further discussed in this thesis.

3.3 Touch

The study of communication by physical touch is known as haptics. It may involve handshakes, pats on the back, hugs and other gestures. However, while touch can be powerful in everyday interpersonal interactions, it generally does not play any role in formal presentations.⁵⁰

3.4 Overall Appearance

Clothing is another aspect which a person needs to consider in understanding non-verbal communication. The way a person is dressed is of essential importance in every culture.⁵¹ Different design elements present on clothing, including aspects like colors, texture, and patterns, play a significant role in shaping how a person is perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. By choosing specific design elements individuals can “allow the clothes to speak for what the wearer believes in.” However, the communication mostly relies on the perception of the receiver.⁵²

Furthermore, clothing choices are often heavily shaped by social norms. According to a psychologist Dr. Glenn Wilson people feel most comfortable when “wearing the right thing for the occasion.”⁵³ Considering the example of high heels, which many people wear despite their discomfort, primarily due to societal expectations rather than personal preference. This contrast is evident in the hiking community, where high heels are not even considered as an option of footwear. Despite their discomfort, high heels are still deemed appropriate for various occasions, including business meetings, casual outings, and special events.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ “Communication in the Real World: 4.2 Types of Nonverbal Communication,” University of Minnesota, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://open.lib.umn.edu/communication/chapter/4-2-types-of-nonverbal-communication/>.

⁵¹ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 93.

⁵² Asliza Aris, Adlene Aris, and Nazirah Mohd. Ba'ai, “Clothing and Style as Nonverbal Communication in the Society,” *International Journal of INTI* 24, (2020): 37-40.

⁵³ Glenn Wilson, *Body Language: The Signals You Don't Know You're Sending, and How to Master Them* (London: Icon Books Ltd, 2016), 19.

⁵⁴ Georgia Maxey, “Fashion Psychology: The Relationship Between Clothing and Self,” *Counseling and Family Therapy Scholarship Review* 4, no. 1 (2022): 3.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN TWO TED TALKS

4 RESEARCH GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the strategies employed by TED Talk speakers to effectively convey their messages. It seeks to understand the use of non-verbal communication cues such as body language, facial expressions, and paralanguage features such as rate, volume, and pitch to support their message.

Additionally, the study aims to determine whether the more popular of the two TED Talks, defined by its view counts, includes a higher frequency of hand gestures and other non-verbal communication as compared to the less popular one. The analysis draws largely from the insights of Vanessa Van Edwards, a behavioral investigator with over 13 years of experience at the professional communications organization Science of People. Van Edwards' research indicates a direct correlation between the use of body language and the effectiveness of a professional presentation. As Vanessa Van Edwards has stated, "The more hand gestures, the more successful the talk,"⁵⁵ and on average 465 gestures are featured consciously or unconsciously in an 18-minute talk. This thesis attempts to validate such findings.

The TED Talks selected for this thesis were chosen using the following criteria. The videos were sourced from the TED organization's official website, <https://www.ted.com>. Each talk fell within the duration range of 12 to 18 minutes, a choice guided by the belief that such a timeframe is "short enough to hold people's attention, including on the Internet, and precise enough to be taken seriously. But it's also long enough to say something that matters."⁵⁶ The most viewed talk identified was "Inside the mind of a master procrastinator" by Tim Urban, which focuses on the theme of procrastination. Therefore, the objective was to find another video on the same topic for comparison. The search continued using the keyword "procrastination," starting from the least viewed ones to provide a contrasting perspective. Male speakers were chosen to maintain consistency and eliminate the research variable of gender regarding audience reception. Additionally, talks from the same posting year, 2016, were sought after. This decision originated from the understanding that talks posted earlier might have gathered more views, while those posted later might have faced a disadvantage. Therefore, videos from 2016 are considered to have an equal chance of viewership.

⁵⁵ Vanessa Van Edwards, "5 Secrets of a Successful TED Talk," last modified March 17, 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/5-secrets-successful-ted-talk-vanessa-van-edwards>.

⁵⁶ Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 42.

Following these criteria, the video “The surprising habits of original thinkers” by Adam Grant was discovered.

In analyzing the TED Talks it is crucial to acknowledge that there are parts where non-vocal aspect of non-verbal communication such as posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact, cannot be observed due to the camera’s focus on either the presentation screen or the audience. In Tim Urban’s talk this happens exactly 29 times over the total length of 2 minutes and 34 seconds. The longest interruption lasts 13 seconds and happens twice, first from 1:33 to 1:46, and then from 9:05 to 9:18. With the talk’s total duration being 13 minutes and 54 seconds, 81.5% of the time allows for uninterrupted observation. However, during the time periods when the non-vocal aspects cannot be observed and therefore analyzed, the focus on non-verbal vocal cues such as rate of speech, its volume and pitch of a voice, remains uninterrupted. In Adam Grant’s Talk this occurs precisely 29 times, amounting to a total duration of 2 minutes and 34 seconds. The longest interruption lasts 18 seconds, spanning from 3 minutes and 41 seconds to 3 minutes and 59 seconds into the talk. Out of the total presentation time of 15 minutes and 15 seconds, the speaker remains visible on camera for 83% of the duration. However, during the remaining 17% of the time, vocal cues such as speech rate, volume, and pitch remain continuous. These vocal nuances serve as alternative indicators for understanding the speaker’s message during periods when visual cues are unavailable.

5 TIM URBAN'S TALK

Tim Urban is a writer known for his blog “Wait But Why.” This blog covers a wide range of topics, including science, technology, psychology, philosophy, and more. It has millions of views and thousands of patrons.⁵⁷

5.1 Analysis of Vocal Aspects

To determine the average speech rate, transcripts sourced from the official website were converted into a Word document for word count analysis. The total word count of the talk amounted to 2,233 words over a duration of 13 minutes and 54 seconds (or 834 seconds), resulting in an average rate of approximately 2.68 words per second, equivalent to 161 words per minute. As discussed in the theoretical section, according to the American research and educational organization National Center for Voice and Speech, the typical speech rate during presentations ranges from 100 to 150 words per minute.⁵⁸ Therefore, Tim Urban's speech rate slightly exceeds the average range. However, in focusing on specific segments rather than the overall average, for example at 0:59 when Tom Urban says “and I decided I kind of had to go something like this” he slows down the pace as he says “kind of had to go” compared to how he had spoken before and what follows. This already discussed technique to slow down the pace to highlight important information can prove effective to highlight important information.⁵⁹ In this case the goal is to highlight the importance of the supposed plan. Furthermore, Tim Urban uses pauses in his speech as well. As mentioned above, making pauses in one's speech serves to highlight the words which immediately follow.

Another way Tim Urban uses paralanguage to convey his message is by variation in volume. At 0:29, he increases his volume when emphasizing “want to do that,” adding weight to his words. Conversely, at 1:08, he lowers his voice to maintain audience engagement while slowing his speech rate when he says, “[...] just like a little staircase. How hard could it be to walk up the stairs?” On the other hand, he also uses lower volume along with a faster rate of speech to de-emphasize certain points, as seen at 1:53 when saying “humans are not supposed to pull two all-nighters.”

⁵⁷ “Tim Urban,” Speakers, TED, last accessed April 30, 2024, https://www.ted.com/speakers/tim_urban.

⁵⁸ “Average Speaking Rate and Words per Minute,” VirtualSpeech, last modified November 8, 2022, <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/average-speaking-rate-words-per-minute>.

⁵⁹ “Average Speaking Rate and Words per Minute,” VirtualSpeech, last modified November 8, 2022, <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/average-speaking-rate-words-per-minute>.

Another non-verbal vocal strategy Tim Urban employs to convey his message and emphasize key information is through pitch variation. This technique stands out as the most frequently used among all vocal aspects described. An example of this can be observed in his opening sentence, beginning with “So in college,” and raises his pitch on “college” as the most important idea to open his presentation. Additionally, he often raises his pitch towards the end of a sentence, as demonstrated at 0:29 when he says, “That would be the plan,” emphasizing “plan” with a higher pitch. Urban also uses the technique of lowering his pitch, such as at 1:30 when he mentions, “and I didn’t really write words,” decreasing his pitch on “words.” Although less frequent, this variation in pitch serves as a technique to highlight key words and phrases throughout his speech.⁶⁰

5.2 Analysis of Non-vocal Aspects

In his TED Talk, Tim Urban effectively captures and maintains the audience’s attention through a variety of non-verbal cues, including variations in posture gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact. Regarding posture, he often stands with hunched shoulders and legs slightly apart, however, due to his occasional walking the distance between his feet keeps changing. Additionally, Urban significantly leans forward when emphasizing key points, as evidenced by his continuous forward lean from 8:30 to 8:40 as he tells a story.

Throughout the talk, Urban’s hands are frequently in motion, accompanying his speech with beat gestures. Beat gestures, as mentioned above, are rhythmical gestures used repetitively with no specific meanings related to the verbal content but are meant to guide the audience’s attention.⁶¹ His beat gestures typically involve open palms facing up, extending outwards to engage the audience, and often escalate to “flamboyant” movements, sweeping from above his head to both sides. Alongside beat gestures, Urban employs a range of deictic, iconic, and metaphoric gestures. Example of a deictic gesture happens at 0:29 when Urban says, “like that” and points to the screen. An iconic gesture is evident at 1:10 as he says, “walk up the stairs” and uses his hand to illustrate the movement of walking up the stairs.

⁶⁰ Sue Shellenbarger, “How to Improve Your Public Speaking: Can You Make the Tone and Pitch of Your Voice Better?” *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-improve-your-public-speaking-can-you-make/docview/1688764170/se-2>.

⁶¹ David McNeill, *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), quoted in Elizabeth Austin, and Naomi Sweller, *Presentation and Production: The Role of Gesture in Spatial Communication* (Boca Raton: Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 2014), 93.

Furthermore, at 1:57, Urban employs a metaphoric gesture. As he mentions “sprinted across campus,” he swiftly moves his right hand from right to left, imitating the action of sprinting.

Facial expressions are not always visible due to camera recordings occasionally not focusing on the speaker’s face. However, when Urban’s face is captured, his expressions are revealed. Raised eyebrows are a common feature, indicating his engagement and emphasis on certain points. Additionally, occasional smiles break through, adding warmth to his delivery.

As for eye contact, Tim Urban’s gaze moves across different parts of the audience. This scanning of different sections ensures that each person feels engaged and included. By avoiding prolonged stares, Urban maintains a natural and welcoming atmosphere, enhancing the overall impact of his talk.

For his clothing Tim Urban chose a simple black T-shirt with short sleeves, paired with pressed blue jeans and brown shoes. As previously mentioned, dressing appropriately for the occasion ensures comfort and confidence in individuals.⁶² TED’s content director, Kelly Stoetzel, advises speakers to choose “reasonably casual clothes,” a recommendation that Urban has followed. Additionally, Stoetzel emphasizes the importance of well-fitting clothing, neither too loose nor too tight, which Tim adheres to as well. His clothes are tailored to fit him perfectly, ensuring a polished appearance on a stage.⁶³

⁶² Glenn Wilson, *Body Language: The Signals You Don’t Know You’re Sending, and How to Master Them* (London: Icon Books Ltd, 2016), 19.

⁶³ Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 158-159.

6 ADAM GRANT'S TALK

Adam Grant is a psychologist who specializes in human behavior. His research has inspired people to question their beliefs about motivation, creativity, and generosity. For seven years, he has been a top-rated professor at the Wharton School. He has sold millions of copies of his books and hosts his own podcast called "WorkLife with Adam Grant."⁶⁴

6.1 Analysis of Vocal Aspects

To calculate the average speech rate, the same method as in the previous TED Talk analysis was used. The transcript from the official website was transferred into Word document in order to count the total number of words spoken during the speech. In his talk Adam Grant said 2,483 words over a duration of 15 minutes and 15 seconds (or 915 seconds). This results in an average rate of 2.71 words per second, which is equivalent to approximately 163 words per minute. As observed in the previous analysis, this speed of 163 words per minute is considered slightly faster than average. During his talk, Adam Grant varies his speech rate. For example, at 10:43 he speeds up his rate when he says "so people hear about this study" when he does not try to highlight any key points. Other times he slows down to emphasize his words which happens for example at 5:51 when he says, "It was agony." This strategy of making variations in his rate helps to support the message said verbally. Furthermore, Grant pauses at appropriate moments to avoid speaking over laughter or applause. Additionally, he also employs so called "strategic pauses" to focus the attention on the following words.⁶⁵ This happens for instance at 1:52 when he says, "You know that panic you feel a few hours before a big deadline when you haven't done anything yet," then he pauses for less than two seconds to highlight the following information: "I just feel that a few months ahead of time."

In terms of volume, Grant maintains a consistent level throughout his presentation, generally speaking loudly to ensure clarity and engagement with his audience. Sometimes he strategically adjusts his volume to convey nuances in meaning and to draw attention to key points within his discourse.

When focusing on Adam Grant's pitch, it is noticeable that he raises his pitch when asking questions or emphasizing certain words. An illustration of this can be seen at 0:56 in

⁶⁴ "Adam Grant," Speakers, TED, last accessed April 30, 2024, https://www.ted.com/speakers/adam_grant.

⁶⁵ Sue Shellenbarger, "How to Improve Your Public Speaking: Can You Make the Tone and Pitch of Your Voice Better?" *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/how-improve-your-public-speaking-can-you-make/docview/1688764170/se-2>.

his talk, where he asks the question “and now?” Additionally, Grant tends to elevate his pitch when emphasizing specific terms, typically towards the end of his sentences. At 12:42, for instance, he states, “85% of them stayed silent instead of speaking up,” and accents the phrase “speaking up” by raising his pitch.

6.2 Analysis of Non-vocal Aspects

During the TED Talk, there are several changes in the speaker’s movement. Initially, he stands in one place with his feet shoulder-width apart. This posture is a signal of confidence,⁶⁶ therefore helps to support the message said.⁶⁷ As the lecture progresses, he begins to take steps back and forth. Towards the end, he moves around the stage and communicates more freely with all sections of the audience. His posture remains mostly steady, upright, only occasionally relaxing, and slightly hunching during pauses caused by laughter or applause. A notable instance of this can be observed at 2:31, where the speaker’s posture momentarily relaxes in response to audience reaction to convey a sense of ease.

Adam Grant frequently uses beat gestures to emphasize the points he discusses. These gestures often involve one or both hands, with palms facing up and fingers naturally spread out, moving by his waist swiftly up and down. The length and intensity of these movements vary according to the verbal content ranging from subtle gestures spanning about 5 centimeters to about 20 or 30 centimeters. As mentioned, “flamboyant” gestures are noticeable among effective speakers.⁶⁸ Grant performs these gestures almost continuously, sometimes adding emphasis with a vigorous nod of his head. In addition to these gestures, Grant occasionally employs a different type of beat gesture, one in which he moves his hands parallel to his waist with palms open to the opposing sides. He typically utilizes this gesture when asking questions to further engage with the audience.

In addition to the beat gestures observed in this performance, Adam Grant also employs iconic gestures to visually emphasize his verbal message. For example, when discussing aspects of his own experiences, Grant often accompanies his words with a pointed gesture towards himself. Or at 6:43 when he mentions “crossing out lines,” where he mimics the act

⁶⁶ Joe Navarro, *The Dictionary of Body Language: A Field Guide to Human Behavior* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 98.

⁶⁷ Raymond H. Hull, “The Art of Nonverbal Communication in Practice,” *The Hearing Journal* 69, no. 5 (May 2016): 22.

⁶⁸ Fatik Baran Mandal, “Nonverbal Communication in Humans,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 24, no. 4 (April 2014): 419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.831288>.

of physically crossing out lines, providing a visual representation that complements his verbal description.

Deictic gestures are similarly common throughout Grant's presentation, serving to further illustrate his points. An illustrative example occurs when he points over his head to a slide behind him, describing the topic ahead. In addition to deictic gestures, he also employs metaphoric gestures. For instance, when exploring various steps of procrastination, he uses a series of sequential gestures in the air, visually representing each stage of the process.

Focusing on the face, minimal use of facial expressions is noticeable during Adam Grant's speech. Occasionally he employs some smiles accenting his delivery. His expressions remain subtle for the most part, lending an air of seriousness to his discourse. However, the occasional smile serves as a warm invitation to engage with his audience, offering moments of connection intervening his composed demeanor.

Regarding his eye contact with the audience, Adam Grant's gaze is dynamic, constantly shifting from one side of the room to the other. His head follows, moving from left to right, further emphasizing his engagement with all sections of the audience. His eyes race around, never staying for more than a couple of seconds in one place, ensuring that everyone in the audience feels included and acknowledged. This frequent eye movement enhances the sense of connection between Grant and his listeners. According to Chris Anderson, the head of the TED organization, the combination of smiles and effective eye contact plays an important role in creating a bond and reinforcing a sense of connection between the speaker and the audience.⁶⁹

Adam Grant wears a grey sweatshirt with a v-neckline, letting his white T-shirt show underneath. He pairs this with dark blue jeans and red sneakers. This style fits the semi-casual recommendation for TED Talks, as advised by TED's content director Kelly Stoetzel, who also stresses the importance of well-fitted clothing.⁷⁰ Grant adheres to this guideline as well.

⁶⁹ Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 53.

⁷⁰ Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 158.

7 COMPARISON

Beginning with speech rate, both speakers tend to speak slightly faster than the recommended average. Both speakers communicate around 160 words per minute, with their rate increasing or decreasing at key moments to accent the importance of specific segments over the overall average. This is evident for example in Tim Urban's talk when he deliberately slows down his pace at strategic moments, such as when he emphasizes the phrase "kind of had to go," highlighting the significance of a supposed plan. Like Urban, Grant also varies his speech rate, occasionally speeding up or slowing down to emphasize key points. Both speakers also use the power of pauses, strategically inserting them to draw attention to preceding or subsequent information, therefore enhancing clarity and emphasis.

In terms of volume modulation, they both share a similar approach, adjusting their volume to emphasize crucial points, therefore enhancing their delivery. Tim Urban modulates his volume, increasing it to add weight to certain phrases like "want to do that," while lowering it to maintain engagement for instance when saying "humans are not supposed to pull two all-nighters." Adam Grant maintains mostly a consistent volume throughout his presentation, ensuring clarity, only occasionally raising his volume to highlight certain points he is making.

As for pitch variation, Tim Urban raises his pitch in nearly every sentence. He starts with his opening sentence, when he emphasizes "college" to set the tone for his presentation. Adam Grant occasionally employs this technique as well, although not as frequently as Urban. Grant uses this technique mostly when asking a question, as can be seen when he asks, "and now?" This technique adds dynamism to his delivery and helps to accent important concepts. This technique can be seen in standard English, for example, with the use of question tags, with rising intonation used when the speaker is not sure about the answer, i.e., is asking a genuine question, and falling intonation used when the speaker already knows or is confident about the answer and is asking merely for confirmation.

Shifting the focus on the non-vocal aspects of their non-verbal communication such as posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and their clothing, there are notable distinctions. When it comes to posture, Urban's shoulders are generally hunched back, but he makes use of this and leans forward when he wants to emphasize certain points. On the other hand, Adam Grant maintains an upright posture, hunching only slightly when he laughs, thus showing a gesture (knowingly or not) that humanizes the speaker.

The contrast between these two speakers is mostly evident in their gestures. Despite the fact that both speakers use their hands to accompany their speech, they do so differently. Tim Urban shows a diverse range of gestural techniques throughout his presentation, including deictic, metaphoric, iconic, and beat gestures with remarkable frequency. He seamlessly transitions between these different types of gestures, making use of each to emphasize different points throughout his talk. In contrast, Adam Grant mainly relies on beat gestures in his delivery. These gestures typically involve movements of his hands by his waist, moving them up and down with palms open and facing up, spanning a range from 5 to 30 centimeters. Furthermore, the scale of Tim Urban's gestures tends to be more expansive compared to those of Adam Grant. Throughout his speech, Urban frequently raises his hands above his head or extends them to both sides, using the full range of motion to emphasize his points. In contrast, Grant's gestures are more restrained, typically confined to smaller movements that accompany his words. While both speakers use hand gestures to enhance their verbal communication, Tim Urban's approach is characterized by its diversity and expansiveness, whereas Adam Grant's gestures are more focused and consistent.

When it comes to facial expressions, Tim Urban uses a broader spectrum, often raising his eyebrows to add emphasis to his words, while Adam Grant's expressions are minimal. Despite this contrast, both speakers share a common tendency to smile frequently throughout their speeches, contributing to a sense of warmth and connection with the audience.

In terms of eye contact, both Urban and Grant demonstrate a dynamic approach, frequently shifting their gaze between different sections of the audience within seconds. This deliberate engagement with various audience members helps to establish rapport and inclusivity.

Furthermore, both speakers opt for semi-casual attire, aligning with the recommended dress code for such occasions. Their choice of clothing reflects a balance between professionalism and approachability, allowing them to connect with the audience on a relatable level while still maintaining a sense of credibility and authority.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has aimed to analyze effective communication strategies using the examples of the TED Talk speakers Tim Urban and Adam Grant. A number of patterns and variations in their usage of non-verbal elements have been discovered, which were then compared or contrasted to vocal aspects such as speech rate, volume, and pitch. Non-vocal cues including posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and clothing were examined and compared, showing each speaker's unique communication style as well as typical features that create effective public speaking.

Both Tim Urban and Adam Grant demonstrate a tendency to speak slightly faster than the recommended average, emphasizing the importance of specific segments in contrast to the overall pace. They both make use of the power of strategic pauses to enhance clarity and emphasis. Moreover, both speakers modulate their volume to emphasize crucial points, thereby enhancing audience engagement and delivery effectiveness.

Nevertheless, one assumption was proven wrong through the analysis: the notion that excessive modulation in pitch might overwhelm the audience.⁷¹ Despite Tim Urban's frequent pitch changes, his talk remains the most viewed, challenging this belief.

Shifting focus to non-vocal aspects of non-verbal communication, such as posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and attire, we observe notable distinctions between the two speakers. Tim Urban's gestural repertoire is characterized by diversity and expansiveness, incorporating a range of techniques to emphasize different points throughout his talk. In contrast, Adam Grant's gestures are more focused and consistent, primarily relying on beat gestures to punctuate his speech.

Facial expressions also play a significant role in non-verbal communication, with Tim Urban demonstrating a broader spectrum of expressions, including raised eyebrows for emphasis, while changes in Adam Grant's expressions remain minimal. However, both speakers share a common tendency to smile frequently, fostering a sense of warmth and connection with the audience.

Additionally, both Tim Urban and Adam Grant exhibit a dynamic approach to eye contact, frequently shifting their gaze to engage with different sections of the audience. This

⁷¹ Emma Rodero, Olatz Larrea, Isabel Rodríguez-De-Dios, and Ignacio Lucas, "The Expressive Balance Effect: Perception and Physiological Responses of Prosody and Gestures," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 41, no. 6 (February 2022): 659–684, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X221078317>.

deliberate engagement helps establish rapport and inclusivity, enhancing audience connection and receptivity.

To conclude, both speakers demonstrate the use of many of the strategies recommended by experts outlined in the theoretical framework. This finding is verified well with the popularity of their talks, as evidenced by their view counts, each accumulating tens of millions of views.

Additionally, the research sought to investigate whether the more popular TED Talk, Tim Urban's presentation, featured a higher frequency of gestures compared to the less popular one by Adam Grant. As noted by behavior investigator Vanessa Van Edwards, "the more hand gestures, the more successful the talk,"⁷² a theory that this research confirmed.

This comparison of non-verbal communication strategies employed by Tim Urban and Adam Grant may offer valuable insights into effective communication techniques and their impact on audience engagement and perception, including the communication of students and teachers in their presentations. By understanding the power of non-verbal cues, speakers can enhance the effectiveness of their communication and leave a lasting impression on their audience.

⁷² Vanessa Van Edwards, "5 Secrets of a Successful TED Talk," last modified March 17, 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/5-secrets-successful-ted-talk-vanessa-van-edwards>.

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