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When spoken words fail us, there are other ways to make ourselves heard. From blinking to signing, here's how language goes beyond speech

“Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind,” said Rudyard Kipling—but they can be wasted.

In the “Sound of Silence”, Simon and Garfunkel picture people “talking without speaking”, using empty words, without meaning or connection.

When talk is taken away through disease, disability or injury, meaningful “speech” can be supplemented or salvaged through blinking, body language, singing, signing, typing and technology. Everyone has a right to be heard.

Blink to speak

In her book *The Blink Of An Eye*, Rikke Schmidt Kj?rgaard describes being locked inside her own body [3], brought back to “the edge of life” following infection and multiple organ failure.

“Apart from sleeping and thinking, the only other thing that I could do was to blink,” she writes. Beginning with one blink for “no” and two for “yes”, blinking became her lifeline, her first step to interacting with the world again.

"Apart from sleeping and thinking, the only other thing that I could do was to blink"

Moving on to mouthing words, Rikke also mastered the spelling board—the alphabet on a piece of card.

Following someone’s finger in “super-annoying slow motion”, from left to right, row after row, she would resist blinking until the right letter was reached, repeating and re-repeating as needed.

Such words, uttered without sound in a nightmare scenario, gave voice to Rikke when voiceless, but very much

alive inside.

Betrayed by body language

The way we stand, sit, or position our arms supplements our speech; gestures and facial expressions give away secrets [4] as other people instinctively pick up on the non-verbal signals that we send.

The body language of Mick Philpott [5], for example, who is serving a life sentence for killing six of his children in an arson attack, revealed his guilt of the crime for which he stood accused. A lack of tears, a static forehead and an extended sad expression alarmed the experts.

According to lawyers, body language can make or break a case. You can win—or lose—a courtroom battle without words.

“Trials are a form of theatre, and when you’re placed in the starring role, it’s imperative that your body says exactly what you want it to,” reports *Lawyer Monthly* [6]. Inside the courtroom, and outside, scrutiny is relentless and every innocuous gesture observed.

Singing in speech therapy

In the film, *The King’s Speech*, a speech therapist teaches King George VI to sing (and swear) to increase fluency in the face of his stammer. Musician Ed Sheeran recognised rapping as a remedy for his stammer.

Oliver Sacks, the late neurologist, describes a man after a stroke singing along to “Ol’ Man River”. Spoken words, which had been lost, soon followed.

For many stroke patients, speech therapists teach the survivor first to sing sentences; the song can be turned into speech as recovery continues.

"Musician Ed Sheeran recognised rapping as a remedy for his stammer"

Every Friday, since 2004, the award-winning Singing Medicine [7] team has brought singing to hospitals around the UK, helping to improve mood and wellbeing—and also aid communication.

In Parkinson’s [8], speech may be slurred, slower or softer, but singing can help increase volume and reduce vocal fatigue when speaking.

Bridging the silence with sign language

Rich and complex, there are perhaps 300 sign languages in use worldwide. The British Deaf Association [9] estimates 151,000 users of British sign language [10] in the UK, of whom 87,000 are Deaf.

Beginning with basic handshapes, including the flat hand, the open hand, the clawed hand and the fist, sign language relies on “inventive use of space and movement”, writes Cath Smith in the *Sign Language Companion*.

The location of signs within three-dimensional space, and their speed, direction and type of movement are combined with non-manual features, including expressive use of the head, face and body to convey a message.

In deafblindness, signing can instead be tactile, perhaps tracing letters or even the six dots of a braille cell onto the palm.

Werner Herzog’s profound and deeply moving 1971 documentary film, *The Land of Silence and Darkness*, follows Fini Straubinger, who became deafblind in early life, as she reaches out to others with deafblindness by a series of taps and strokes on their hands.

Dementia and keyboard typing

In her second book on life with dementia [11], Wendy Mitchell explains how, when spoken language started to fail her, writing became “an escape from the roadblocks” in her mind.

“For some reason”, she writes, “the frustration with words didn’t exist between my mind and the page. Here, at my keyboard, I didn’t stumble in my search for a phrase; somehow the process of my fingers dancing across the keys meant the words came more fluently.

"The hesitant verbal me can feel frustrating, but the typing me feels calm, fluent and closer to my thoughts and feelings. If I didn’t have the ability to type, I’d be lost, caught up in the hesitancy and inability to express myself.”

Dementia affects people differently. Sometimes (but not always), the tone of a voice and the touch from a hand can communicate a message of reassurance and comfort, even when words may have lost their meaning.

Text-to-speech technology

Lee Ridley, who has cerebral palsy, uses the automated voice on his iPad to communicate and perform stand-up comedy, winning *Britain’s Got Talent* in 2018.

Physicist Stephen Hawking [12] tried and tested—and turned down—many speech-generating devices as his motor neurone disease progressed, becoming instrumental in their design and development.

"Stephen’s synthesised voice became familiar all over the world"

Favouring a cheek-operated switch that selected words as they appeared on a screen, Stephen’s synthesised voice became familiar all over the world.

His dreams of hot air balloons during the time when he lost his original voice assured him that there was hope (later found in technology) on the horizon.

Allowing only a few words each minute, voice synthesisers rule out idle chatter. When speaking through a computer, every word counts—and less can be more when it comes to words.

Not speaking all that we think—and thinking twice before we speak—are important life lessons for us all.

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