

# ΣΟΦΙΑ—SOPHIA

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## Characterization of the speech of student researchers of the Law Program of a university of Cali-Colombia, 2014

Martha Ines Torres Arango  
Gloria Stella Lizarralde  
Fernando Carlos Terreros  
Cynthia Lineth Ramírez  
Paula Andrea Castañeda

Santiago de Cali University,  
Law Program

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## Abstract

Oral communication or speech represents for any human being its essential (not unique) way of sociocultural interaction. With the establishment of orality in the Colombian judicial process, it is necessary for legal professionals to improve their oral communication skills. The objective of this research was to identify the characteristics of the speech process in the aspects of voice, diction, fluency and prosody of the student researchers of the Santiago de Cali University Law Program. A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out, selecting a non-probabilistic sample of 38 people. Univariate and bivariate analyzes were performed. It was evidenced that although the speech presented by the study population is functional for some everyday contexts, speech difficulties were found such as dysfluency in 63.16%; and dysprosody in more than 50% of the population, among others. This influences the discursive dynamic of Oral Hearing, which is the essential tool of the jurisdictional task of legal professionals.

Keywords: Communication, speech, voice, voice disorders, lawyer, fluency disorder

## Introduction

Human communication is an essential need for the subsistence of groups and communities, (Niño Rojas, 2011); this is given through spoken and written language. It is language that allows the human being to learn and categorize reality, build knowledge and transform cultural and social experiences, made visible in communicative interactions in different activities and everyday contexts, work, education, science, among others. (Niño Rojas, 2007)

Oral communication or speech represents for any human being its essential (not unique) way of sociocultural interaction. Communicating orally in a competent manner allows people to exchange opinions, argue, understand, make a global vision of the world, encourage the participation of others, command personnel, persuade, among others. (Baralo, 1997)

Oral communicative competence is understood as a set of strategic and discursive processes that contribute to the understanding of discourse, the communication context and the degree of formalization required. (Peña Borrero, 2008). At present, emphasis is placed on the importance of the development of oral communicative competence for success in the process of professional interaction in different contexts. (Delgado, 2008)

With the introduction of orality in the Colombian judicial process, it is necessary for legal

professionals to improve their oral communication skills, becoming the essential tool in the judicial task as an instrument to facilitate due respect for the rights and guarantees of citizens in a modern State of Law. (Judicial Summit, 2008), (Cano Jaramillo, 2014)

Oral hearing in Colombia has been gradually implemented in some areas of law, such as the case of the labor field (Article 42 of the Labor Procedure Code, modified by Article 21 of Law 712 of 2001 and Law 1149 of 2007), criminal law (Law 906 of 2004 and Law 270 of 1996), among others. (Rodríguez Muñoz, 2010)

Aware of this, the Speech therapy Research Group (GIF, for its initials in Spanish), in conjunction with the Ataraxia research group of the Santiago de Cali University's Law program, proposed the Oral Communicative Competency research project in Research Students of the Law Program, which aims to optimize the performance of oral communication of research students of the Law Program, providing a added value in their higher education, which in addition to graduating with the best academic competences, perform adequately in their oral communication, influencing this in their subsequent performance as lawyers.

In the first phase, the speech process was characterized; the design and implementation of the speech therapy intervention was subsequently carried out; and finally, in the third phase, the efficacy of the intervention in the study population was evaluated.

This article shows the results of the first phase that aimed to identify the characteristics of the speech process in the aspects of breathing, resonance, phonation, articulation, fluency, and prosody (suprasegmental aspects, rhythm, pauses and speed), (Cross Conejo, 2007), (Perelló, 1977), (Mysak, 1989) and (Martinet, 1972).

### Materials and methods

For the first phase, it was carried out an observational study with a transversal descriptive design.

The population was composed by all the students of the Law program of the University Santiago de Cali, which has 2127 enrolled students, according to list extracted from the technological platform of the university

The sample consisted of 38 students who were linked to the different research nurseries of the program; it was a non-probabilistic, convenience sampling ( $n = 38$ ).

As exclusion criteria, there were taken into account those students who didn't have the consent or informed assent (properly) signed, as well as those who did not present during the days of speech therapy evaluations.

Two instruments were taken into account for data collection, one for interview or anamnesis; another for speech therapy evaluation. The first one inquired about the socio-demographic variables, use of the voice and symptoms of the vocal organ; the second instrument collected information on variables related to acoustic perceptual characteristics, modality of the note, phonation behavior, prosody and suprasegmental aspects.

The acoustic perceptual characteristics taken into account were intensity, pitch and timbre; and for the modality of the note, there were described the variables attack, body and filament.

The variables mode, type, murmur and phono-respiratory coordination, phonation capacity and nasal function are the specific ones of the phonation behavior.

The variables that were described to characterize the prosodic aspects were: suprasegmental,

accent, intonation, as well as fluidity, speed, rhythm, diction and pauses.

Each of the variables of the second instrument were dichotomous, with the measures called adequate and altered; if the variable was classified as altered, it was selected as the type of alteration.

For the collection of information, there were trained two seniors and a graduate from the Speech Therapy Program of the same university; the training was directed by a speech therapist, with specialization in Phoniatics and 19 years of experience in the area.

The training had two categories, one related to conceptual (aspects) and the other to the instruction for the completion of each of the fields of the instruments.

Initially, the research project was presented to all the students and teachers in charge of the research nurseries of the Law Program. In this presentation, the consent and informed assent was explained, the consent was given in physical, the assent for the students to sign in case of wanting to participate, and parental consent was given to students under 18 years of age for their parents to authorize their participation.

Students were informed about availability times for the application of anamnesis and evaluation.

Each interviewer applied the evaluation format to two people at different times in order to determine the agreement between evaluators, from here the test was adjusted in terms of the application times.

The application of the anamnesis (face-to-face interview) and evaluation was done individually, and subsequently the expert speech therapist made weekly verification of the quality of the collected data.

Finally, it was made a report of each one of the persons in the study population, it was handed over (to them), explained, and the corresponding recommendations were given to each one.

This project was endorsed by the Ethics and Bioethics Committee of the Faculty of Health of the Santiago de Cali University, through Act No. 02 of March 21, 2014.

## Results

### Univariate analysis

The study population consisted of 55.26% (21/38) of male subjects, and 44.74% (17/38) of female subjects; or directly 21 men and 17 women, with the percentages in parentheses.

84.21% (32/38) of the study population are from Valle del Cauca province.

75% (28/38) of the study population belong to socioeconomic strata 1, 2 and 3.

52.63% of the study population performs another activity alternate to their occupation as a student, which influenced the student's time to organize times for the activities of the present project.

The age of the participants ranged between 19 and 51 years, with an average of 32.15 years and a median of 31.50 years.

From the initial interview or anamnesis, people refer vocal organ symptoms, which affect the quality of the vocal projection; the main symptom was clearing 36.84% (14/38), followed by cough with 18.42%, and dryness with 15.79%; the least found symptoms were foreign body sensation with 10.53% (4/38), respiratory oppression, and drowning; each one with 7.89% (3/38).

In relation to the variation of the voice symptoms perceived by the study population, it was evidenced that 55.26% of the population (21/38) experienced variations of the symptoms at different times of the day and with the influence of various environmental and organic factors, causing a decrease in the quality of the voice.

During the evaluation process of the students, it was found that 86.84% of the population (33/38) presented alteration in phono-respiratory coordination; 68.42% (26/38) showed a superior costal respiratory type at rest and phonation.

In perceptual acoustic skills, it was found that 28.95% (11/38) have increased vocal intensity; in 7.89% (3/38), their intensity is decreased; and

63.16% (24/38) have an adequate voice intensity.

Regarding pitch, it was found that 60.53% (23/38) had a low pitch of voice; and 39.47% a high pitch. These results are appropriate for the population of men and women who participated in the research.

The majority of the study population presented adequate oropharyngeal timbre of the voice, 89.47% (34/38); and 10.63% (4/38) presented timbre alteration; with loss of brightness or vocal 'roughness'.

Regarding the modalities of the sound, which was determined by the sustained emission of a vowel, it was found that 47.37% (18/38) obtained a strong attack; 81.58% (31/38) presented an adequate body; and 21.05% (8/38) presented altered filament.

Next, there are described the percentages of alterations in the suprasegmental aspects of the study population: accent, 78.95% (30/38); intonation, 50% (19/38); speed, 52.63% (20/38); pauses, 39.48% (15/38); and fluency, 63.16% (24/38).

84.21% (26/38) of the study population presented some alteration in their diction.

### B. Bivariate analysis

In the subjects who presented some accent alteration, it was found that:

- 46.66% (14/30) were women; and 53.33% (16/30) men.
- 60% (18/30) presented alteration in the speed, with changes of increase and decrease of inadequate form.
- 86.66% (26/30) showed alterations in diction.
- 70% (21/30) alterations in phono-respiratory coordination.
- 50% (15/30) showed alterations in pauses.
- 73.33% (22/30) presented alteration in fluency, this being a significant correlation ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.3409$  Pr = 0.012). The affected fluency in turn shows weaknesses in the

domain of the subject, the structure of the sentence, and complete expressions that allow a cohesive sequence of the expression.

In the study population that presented alterations in fluency, it was found that:

- 54.16% (13/24) are men and 45.83% (11/24) are women;
- 79.16% (19/24) presented alteration in phono-respiratory coordination.
- 70.83% (17/24) presented an alteration in speed, this being a significant correlation ( $\chi^2 (2) = 8.7632$  Pr = 0.013).
- 54.17% (13/24) had altered pauses, this being a significant correlation with a  $\chi^2 (2) = 6.0295$  Pr = 0.049.
- 41.66% (10/24) presented alteration in the difficulty (difficulty) in intonation.

As for the people who presented an altered intonation, it was found that:

- 52.63% (10/19) had alterations in articulation and fluency.
- 94.73% (18/19) alterations in phono-respiratory coordination.
- 84.21% (16/19) difficulties in accent.
- 57.89% (11/19) incorrect respiratory type.

**Table 1.** Difficulty in the accent of the study population.

Variable		n	Difficulty in the accent	%
Sex	Men	21	16	76.9
	Women	17	14	82.35
Speed	Augmented	11	9	81.82
	Diminished	9	9	100
Alteration in diction	Normal	18	12	66.67
	Yes	32	26	81.25
Phono-respiratory coordination	No	6	4	66.67
	Altered	33	26	78.79
Difficulty in intonation	Normal	5	4	80
	Yes	19	16	84.21
	No	19	14	73.68

Source: self-made

## Discussion

Although the level of speech presented by law students is functional for some everyday contexts, there were found speech difficulties such as alterations in articulation, 84.21%; alteration in one or more qualities of the voice, 10.63 %; and altered fluency, 63.16%. In addition, there were alterations in prosodic aspects: accent, 78.95%; intonation, 50%; speed, 52.63%; and pauses, 39.48%.

It is highlighted that all the alterations described above can negatively influence the discursive dynamics of Oral hearing, which is the essential tool of the jurisdictional task of legal professionals. Given that speech difficulties mark an important pattern in the attention of the interlocutor, they may cause that more care be given to those difficulties than what is being said at a given moment.

Specifically, intonation is linked to affective contents that transmit relative information of the position of the speaker with respect to a statement by means of expressions of surprise, irony, doubt, sarcasm, indifference, among others. (Real Academia Española, 2010) At the same time, intonation marks clarity in the type of expression, to affirm, to question or exalt, varying the tonality and intensity of the voice throughout and at the end of the discourse. In this order of ideas, if there is any alteration of intonation, this affects oral hearing given that there will be a flat expression, which does not allow the information to be complete, which it will not be (well) interpreted if what is said is instead affirmed or asked; and in its defect, the significance of the discourse changes. (López, Torres Arango, Arguello Vélez, & Lizarralde, 2016)

On the other hand, although intonation is of relevant importance at the time of presenting oneself at a public hearing, there are other important factors that go beyond the legal controversy, like showing respect for the judge or magistrate and for the counterpart. For this reason, it is customary the presence of a police officer or an additional official, who before starting the hearing enunciates the rules of respect that must be present in the scenario

of orality. Failure to comply with these rules generates disciplinary sanctions for the parties, and it could hinder the normal development of the process, which is why intonation is one of the most important tools in an oral trial, because it can be used beneficially, or it can ruin the client's pretensions.

Being accent "the perceptive sensation that emphasizes a syllable on the rest of the syllables of the word" (Gil, 2007), an alteration in accent on the part of a lawyer makes deficient the performance in oral hearing, as it is essential that the lawyer emphasizes a syllable or a word, to indicate its relevance in the speech. In oral hearing, it is very important to know how to express ideas without ambiguities. Trying to make understand an idea without the correct use of accents, easily leads the interlocutor, which in this case is the judge, to mistakenly understand what it is wanted to express, making ineffective the work of the lawyer.

Fluidity is part of human communication, and it is evident in speech, when a person achieves extensions of a phrase and a sentence with high lexical availability, cohesive syntactic relationships, and discursive sequence of ideas (beginning, middle, development and end), achieving to centralize the attention of the public with what it is expressed (Birkenbhi, 1983). According to this, any alteration in fluency affects oral hearing by making that coherent sentences cannot be constructed, since it is lacking a broad lexicon that allows to correctly string together one sentence with another until a solid discourse can be built, whose sequentially joined parts leads to the expression of complete ideas, which inevitably results in discursive failure in the face of scenarios in which litigation or discussion are legally protected, such as life, health, freedom or heritage.

Similarly, difficulties in diction, causes that the parties that make up an audience have greater fixation on failures, causing distractions that disconnect the intentional line or primary objective of what it is wanted to convey, while altering the discursive dynamics, reducing the legal relevance within the judicial process. Articulation failures affect (López, Torres Arango, Arguello Vélez, & Lizarralde, 2016) at a given moment the intelligibility of speech,

and consequently, of the discourse that is taking place.

On the other hand, not having an adequate use of voice intensities influences oral hearing. In the event that the lawyer has a diminished intensity, it may affect the intelligibility of the statement, and therefore, the expressions in the legal discourse may not be understood, possibly affecting the defense of the positions, affecting or undermining the fundamental principle of due process, given that the main reasoning of the parties is that they can clearly know the content of the claim and the answer to it, the allegations (which in many cases are made orally), the evidence and the testimonies; so that based on this knowledge, they can be controverted.

The intensity of the voice is essential, to place emphasis place on relevant and important aspects; so that they can forcefully provide the judge or magistrate with sufficient knowledge to make a decision through a legal order or ruling.

If, on the other hand, the intensity is very high, such a situation could distract the parties from the content of the speech and could be taken as an act of grievance, since an increased intensity of the voice can be assimilated to an act of aggression (López, Torres Arango, Arguello Vélez, & Lizarralde, 2016); under no circumstances, screaming or increasing volume, in a scenario of maximum respect, like a stage, is well seen. Emphasis on accentuation, forcefulness of the words, precise language, sequential clarity and logic in a discourse will be fundamental factors in its supreme relevance, in procedural law.

It is really complex to separate, from a discourse in law, the alterations of speech that a professional of the law can present; those alterations (in the oral expression) could, at the end, blur the attention or seriousness at the moment of taking decisions.

## Conclusions

Any alteration in speech can influence a public hearing, from ambiguity in the legal controversy, to favoring the non-compliance with the rules established for the orality scenario.

Intonation is the most important tool in an oral trial, it can be used for the benefit of the parties, or it can hinder the client's pretensions.

On the other hand, alterations in the intensity of the voice can be interpreted as a negation to the fundamental principle of due process of law, or as an act of aggression, if the intensity is respectively diminished or increased.

The altered speech processes found in the participants of this study, or in students who show difficulties in their oral expression, should be intervened within the university environment (they must be send to speech therapy treatment) as an added value of a program, which offers besides excellent academy, integral ethical and human formation.

It is suggested that in professions that require communication, language and speech in an adequate manner, activities be developed in the various training courses, which facilitate oral expression as part of the work of Oral hearing for Law students; as well as foundation, organization, sequence, coherence, logic of the discussion, in the rest of the professionals that require it.

Intervention on oral competence can be extrapolated to (professional) lawyers, as a significant contribution to graduates.

In university environments, the speech therapist generates an important support, not only for oral processes and adequate expression to improve discourse, but also in the processes of reading, writing and comprehension, which make a global complement of human communication.

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