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COMMUNICATION AND TRANSLATION¹

Translating a message from one language to another involves a very complex set of factors; and if one is to comprehend the number and complexity of these factors, it is essential that some of the basic elements of intralingual or intracode communication be fully understood. Accordingly, some introduction to the underlying structure of communication is important for anyone engaged in any kind of translating.

Universality of Communication

Communication is one of the most universal and frequent phenomena of animate existence. All living creatures communicate, and even the most minute parts of such creatures are in communication with one another. The cells of animate organisms do not use words, but they do employ intricate chemical signals to implement important changes in growth, activity, and state of being. By means of hormones certain glands of the body exert controls over the activities of other organs—all of which is essentially a form of communication.

In the animal world the singing of birds is an important means of attracting mates and establishing territory. Dogs communicate by means of different kinds of barks, growls, and whines, but they also communicate their presence in an area by urine—a technique which is of primary importance among wolves, predatory cats, and hippos. Catfish have a particularly elaborate system for communication. By their sense of smell they identify friends and foes, and they do so with astonishingly long memory spans. By biting, chasing, and mouth display catfish show degrees of hostility, and through the skin catfish detect sources of food from the chemical substances which are present in dilution. Porpoises not only have a wide variety of sounds by which they communicate with one another, but they use an elaborate sonar system which makes it possible for them to swim rapidly in total darkness around irregular obstructions. Even bees have been found to communicate in highly elaborate ways. By the number of turns per minute in a wiggle dance a bee can indicate approximately how far away is a source of food, and the angle of the bee's body from the vertical designates the angle between the position of the sun and the location of the food source. Scent also plays a part in bee communication and the length of a whir sound is also used to signal the distance of food supply—so that even some redundancy is built into the bee's communication system.²

¹ This article is based upon a lecture given at a Translators' Seminar in Halle, DDR, during the summer of 1971.

² For detailed information of various communication systems used by non-humans, see Thomas A. Sebeck's reviews in the periodical *Language*, vol. 39, 1963, No. 3, pp. 448-466. They are: *Communication among Social Bees* by Martin Lindauer, *Porpoises and Sonar* by Winthrop N. Kellogg, and *Man and Dolphin* by John C. Lilly.

Elements in Communication

In order to understand the complexity of communication it is useful to employ a model which diagrammatically represents certain of the relations between the interacting parts and features (Figure 1).

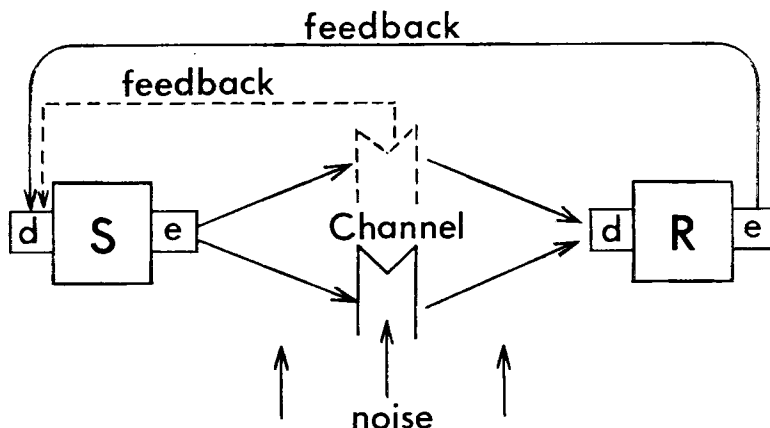


Figure 1

The three crucial elements in this model of communication are the “source” (S), the “message” (M) and the “receptor” (R). Usually the receptor is identified as the “target”, but the term target is rather inappropriate since it implies merely that the goal of the communication is “hit”. In reality, however, the person or persons to whom a message is directed are by no means passive. If the communication is a valid one, those who hear or read a communication must decode, or receive, the message. Hence the term “receptor” is employed here to indicate this active and essential role.

Both the source and receptor of any communication have encoding (e) and decoding (d) mechanisms. That is to say, they have the ability to formulate a message in keeping with some established code and to determine what the message means once it has been received. In most communications the processes of encoding and decoding are almost automatic; in fact, they need to be if communication is to be effective and efficient. Most persons speak their mother tongue with such facility that they do not think about the code while they are talking; they are only conscious of the ideas which they wish to transmit. The sounds, words, and grammar of the language seem to take care of themselves. Anyone engaging in translating, however, soon realizes that the codes of two languages are never the same—in fact, that is precisely what makes the two forms of speech distinct languages. Perhaps one of the really great values of foreign language study is the awareness that comes to a person about his mother tongue, something which he can no longer take quite so much for granted.

In all verbal communications there are always at least two messages which are being communicated simultaneously. The one message (symbolized by

the solid-line M) is the overt verbal message, consisting of words; and the dotted-line M is the covert message (often called the paralinguistic message) which in the case of oral communication consists of such accompanying features as the speaker's tone of voice, the gestures of his hands and face, and even the position or movements of his body. Even in written messages there are paralinguistic messages which accompany the verbal code, e.g. the type of paper on which the message is written or printed (this tells a great deal about the communicator and his attitudes toward the message and the receptor), and the care with which the message has been transcribed (certain types of errors reveal the socio-educational status of the source and others signal the degree of carelessness and inattention). All such information carries an important message.

Human communication is, of course, not restricted to verbal codes. People communicate a great deal by proximity and touch, by eye attention, by body odors (natural and artificial), and by body tension. Though these means of communication involve codes which are much less complex than language, the study and interpretation of such codes is considerably more difficult, since the features of such codes are so subtle and difficult to describe and define.

In addition to the principal components of source, message, and receptor, there are also the features of channel and/or medium. Some persons carefully distinguish between (1) the form of the code, e.g. the spoken word (which may be called the channel), and (2) the medium, e.g. the air, which carries the spoken word from the source to the receptor. But in general the terms channel and medium are used almost interchangeably to identify the means used to get the message from the source to the receptor. Hence, newspapers, radio, and television are called media, but are also spoken of as channels of communication. What is important is not the terminology, but the fact that there must be both (1) a sequence of signals and (2) a means by which the signals can be transmitted from source to receptor. Many acts of verbal communication actually employ several different codes simultaneously: words, gestures, body position, proximity, and tone of voice (as a measure of intensity). The value of television over newspaper for many people is that it can reinforce the message by means of several simultaneously transmitted codes.

Noise, which is symbolized as arrows pointing toward the area of transmission, is anything which distorts the message while it is in transit between the source and the receptor. Noise may be not only physical (a disturbance which impairs the quality of the transmission) but also psychological. For example, inattention on the part of the receptor may be interpreted as a kind of psychological noise. From the standpoint of communication theory, one may also speak of scribal errors as a kind of noise. Some are purely accidental, but others are intentional. A scribe may have thought that he could improve a text by the use of what he considered to be a more accurate term than one used by the original writer, or that he could eliminate an inconsistency by assimilating parallel accounts of the same event. Over a period of several centuries a good deal of "transmissional noise" can get into any manuscript channel.

Feedback is a much more subtle and less readily understood factor in

communication, but it is extremely important. One kind of feedback may be called "instantaneous", the kind of feedback which a speaker detects when he has mispronounced a word. Almost before he gets it out of his mouth he is aware of the mispronunciation and often stops "in mid-stream" to correct it. The second kind of feedback is that which comes from the receptors, who in most oral communication are constantly reacting to what is being said by eye attention, facial gestures, body position, and muscle tension. An effective speaker is always keenly aware of this kind of feedback and ready at any moment to modify his remarks so as to elicit the desired response from his audience. A great difficulty with written communication is the absence of this constant interpersonal feedback.

A third type of feedback (not included in Figure 1) may be called "anticipatory feedback". This is what all effective communicators employ when they encode a message. That is to say, they try to anticipate the kinds of reactions which the message is likely to elicit from the receptors. When writers or speakers do not pay attention to anticipatory feedback, they normally fail miserably to communicate their message. They end up merely talking to themselves.

Most persons assume that in the process of communication the receptor waits until the message, or significant parts of it, have come to him and then tries to decode the meaning of what has been said. But this is not what actually happens. In most situations receptors engage in a kind of parallel encoding. They follow the message of the source by constructing a kind of parallel message and from time to time they compare the two. The fact that such parallel encoding is being done can be readily noted when a speaker hesitates. Sometimes a third of the audience can suggest the right word, and in informal settings they often do not hesitate to do so. This means that the receptors are not simply passive participants, waiting for a sufficient chunk of the message to come through before decoding it. Normally they are actively involved in both decoding and parallel encoding. Further evidence of parallel encoding can be seen from the manner in which discourses are reported by different receptors. What are often widely divergent versions of the original message are essentially the result of the parallel encoding process and the failure of receptors to make adequate comparisons and adjustments. Hence, they remember what they thought they heard, but in reality much of what they retain is what they themselves have encoded.

One further feature of any communication is the setting. This is often taken for granted, but it is extremely important in the interpretation of any message. For example, the comment *he has three degrees* would have quite different meanings in a hospital ward and in an academic discussion. In English the form *stock* may mean cattle, shares in a corporation, or stored goods, and the correct interpretation may depend entirely upon the physical setting: a cattle ranch, a brokerage firm, or a warehouse.

Types of Communication, as Determined by the Feedback

Some of the most important distinctions in communication result from the extent to which feedback is involved. For example, some communication is

essentially in one direction with no feedback. Traffic lights which signal green or red are usually designed to give information to drivers without receiving any information from the traffic. Some traffic lights, however, do involve a measure of two-way communication. For example, a car passing over an impact strip on the roadway may signal to the light that there is a car ready to cross the street, and the light may be "instructed" to respond to such a signal by turning green after a predetermined period of time. In terms of human institutions, the most common form of one-way communication has traditionally been associated with military commands, since orders tend to pass down the chain of command without any particular concern for feedback. Of course, failure of officers to be sensitive to feedback has resulted in a number of serious military failures, but the type of power and status characteristic of hierarchical structures (whether military, governmental, or ecclesiastical) all tend to depreciate feedback and as a result often lose touch with the operative mechanisms.

A second type of communication makes minimal use of feedback, but it is still essentially a one-direction process. For example, machines may be so designed as to keep on processing raw materials as long as they are being properly supplied, but instructed to stop as soon as the supply is no longer being fed into them. Hormone activity in the body seems to reflect essentially this same type of communication. Possibly school exams can also be an illustration of this type of communication.

A third type of communication is based essentially upon two-way communication and implies the reversible roles. The feedback from a receptor may in this type of communication completely change the content of the message from the source. In fact, the receptor may himself become the source of a contradictory message. With computers, the analogy to this type of communication would be two computers playing chess, and in human society this third type of communication would be illustrative of "brainstorming", "workshop sessions", and "think tanks".

Types of Signs

There are many specific forms of signs and symbols but only two principal types: (1) indexical and (2) referential. The indexical signs stand in a one-to-one relation to the meaning which they are designed to convey. As such they may be (a) natural signs, e.g. wet streets as a sign of rain (or a mechanical street sweeper) and smoke as a sign of fire, (b) iconic signs, e.g. a picture, an arrow (pointing traffic in a particular direction), and (c) conventional signs, e.g. a wreath as a sign of grief and red as a sign of danger or a command to stop. Referential signs, normally called symbols, refer not to objects themselves but to concepts about various objects, events, and abstract qualities and quantities. In analyzing verbal symbols, it is often convenient to distinguish between those which refer to nonlinguistic phenomena (the practical world of objects, events, and abstractions) and those which refer to linguistic phenomena, e.g. terms such as *noun*, *verb*, *adjective*, *particle*, etc. These latter terms are often called metalinguistic.

Types of Messages

Most people think of human communication almost completely in terms of words and sentences. Hence, it may be important to emphasize the distinction which Professor Suzanne Langer has made between discursive and presentational truth.³ The first type consists of either verbal formulations or expressions which can be transformed into verbal symbols, e.g. mathematical formulas. But presentational truth cannot be transformed into words—for example, moving music, inspired art, heroic deeds, all of which communicate truth but only by means of quite different symbolic systems. One may describe the objects of presentational truth, but it is quite impossible to transpose them into language, so that they can in turn be recast in their original forms.

The Uses of Communication

The uses of communication are almost as varied as the features and processes involved in transmitting messages. Most people think that communication is designed merely to inform people. Information is quite naturally one of the principal purposes of communication, but there are many other uses, and without a clear understanding of all the possible aspects of communication a translator can miss the mark seriously. One of the important uses of communication is for expression, in which the focus of the discourse is primarily upon the manner in which the source expresses his own feelings, often with little or no concern for the reaction of receptors. Lyric poetry is one typical kind of expressive communication. In such discourse the source is normally very personal and feels an inner constraint to reveal his feelings, whether or not other people can understand or appreciate them. In oral communication, exaggerated infonational contours are typical of expressive language, and those who use such language are often amazed when others understand their words literally. Cursing seems simply a way of “getting it off one’s chest”.

The directive (or imperative) function of language focuses upon the response of the receptor and is designed to procure action. This type of language normally involves clear instructions, short utterances, and accentuated intonation. Only enough information is communicated to induce and control action. In fact, too much information is regarded as a liability, since it may distract the receptors from responding promptly and correctly.

The contact function of language (often spoken of as “phatic language”) is designed to keep the source and receptor in contact with one another. Such language is very important on the telephone. If a receptor does not respond with some type of signal (e.g. *yes*, *um-hum*, *oh*, or *ah*, every five to ten seconds), the source is almost immediately disconcerted and will often ask, “Are you still on?” In conversations receptors often fill in with pointless questions or meaningless comments, just to let the source know that they are still participating. The contact function of communication is especially common with birds, which chirp constantly to let other birds know of their presence. In some religious rituals the response of the worshippers is essential as a contact function—to show that they are still awake.

³ Suzanne K. Langer. 1951. *Philosophy in a New Key*. New York: New American Library.

The referential function is, as noted above, ordinarily thought to be the primary purpose of language, but as a matter of fact people probably use language far more for other purposes than for reference. Even when the referential function seems very prominent (for example, in scholarly discourse and writing), it may be that the source is far more concerned with enhancing his own prestige than with communicating concepts to others. If such were not the case, one would certainly expect scholars to employ far more intelligible language.

In addition to these primary functions of language (that is, the expressive, directive, contact, and referential functions), there are two secondary functions: esthetic and metalinguistic. The esthetic function involves the universal feature of decorating or estheticizing speech. This may be done by means of elaborate rhetorical forms (some of the world's most primitive peoples often use very intricate rhetorical forms to decorate their communications) and involved poetic structures (including complex patterns of rhythm, rhyme, and assonance). The tendency for people to decorate is universal and they may choose to use words just as well as wood as a means of esthetic expression.

The metalinguistic use of language involves forms of language to speak about language itself. The grammatical lexicon of a language (for example, *verb, pronoun, passive voice, subjunctive mode, transitive*, etc.) are all part of the metalanguage. In some cultures this aspect of language is very poorly developed, since the people have taken no interest in talking about how they talk. For the linguist and the translator, however, metalanguage is a very important tool in understanding, describing, and explaining what takes place in the processes of verbal communication.

Types of Discourse

Since communication takes place under so many different circumstances, involves so many different types of participants, and is designed to respond to so many different purposes, it is inevitable that a number of different types of discourse must be employed. Some of the most common are conversation (in which people hear themselves more than others), lectures (too often academic monologues), sermons (sometimes only new ways of saying the same old thing), political speeches (for maximum applause but with minimal commitment), sales talk (often irrelevant information combined with flattery), jokes and stories (highly stylized and rarely new), team chatter (contact communication for encouragement), blowing off (quite unacceptable in some societies), and confessions (rarely all the truth). These are only a few of the structured ways in which people engage in verbal communication, and each form is capable of extensive modification depending upon the topic, the setting of communication, the relations between participants, and the urgency of the information.

Unfortunately some translators tend to view the various aspects of communication as being essentially unrelated to their task. They imagine that all the decisions with regard to the content, form, setting, and relevance of the message have been determined, and that their task is merely to produce a facsimile of the message in another language. But one cannot do justice to

any text without first considering the various factors of communication which entered into the original discourse. The translator's task is so much more than finding matching words. He must select and arrange the lexical and grammatical features of the receptor language in such a way as to reproduce in so far as possible not only the content of the original communication event but also an equivalent of its form. If this is not done, the translation will certainly fail to be in any sense a dynamic equivalent.

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VARIETIES OF LANGUAGE¹

Most people know that there are a great many different languages in the world, but no one knows exactly how many. Various estimates have been made, but figures based on exact data are simply not available. To some extent, this uncertainty is due to the fact that in some parts of the world no detailed linguistic surveys have been carried out. New Guinea, for example, is reputed to have more than 700 different languages, but there are some sizeable areas of this large island where no linguistic surveys have as yet been made. Moreover, determining whether two different forms of speech should be regarded as related dialects or as separate languages depends largely upon the criteria of mutual intelligibility. In some classifications of languages, for example, all the so-called dialects of Chinese are lumped together as being one language, when in reality several of them (for example, Amoyese, Hakka, and Cantonese) are mutually unintelligible. On the other hand, Spanish and Portuguese, although to a large extent mutually intelligible, are normally regarded as two distinct languages because they have two distinct national "standards". If we speak of mutually unintelligible forms of speech, we can probably arrive at a figure of approximately 2,500 languages in the world. Yet if we were to add up the total number of speakers of only the first hundred of these languages (those with the largest numbers of speakers), we would have a figure exceeding the total population of the earth. The reason for this is that so many people speak two or more of these major languages.

At the end of 1971, at least some portion of the Holy Scriptures had been produced in 1,457 languages, with 253 languages having the entire Bible and 330 more having the New Testament. These languages represent the mother tongues of fully 98 per cent of the world's population. This means, however, that there are approximately 1,000 additional languages (whose speakers comprise less than 2 per cent of the world's population) which do not have any part of the Bible. Certainly, even these languages should have at least some part of God's word, and at present there are Bible translators who are working in fully half of them.

In addition to the multiplicity of languages, there is also the existence of

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