

8. BEYOND THE VEIL OF MISUNDERSTANDING: UNPACKING BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION AND THE NATURE OF MEANING

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Abstract

The concepts of meaning, understanding and or misunderstanding have been of significance in philosophy, linguistics, communication studies, and sociology. This is due to the crucial status of communication among humans as the distortion of meaning and misunderstanding can bring about social imbalance. This article explores the complex nature of human communication, delving into the linguistic, sociocultural, and epistemological barriers that impede meaningful understanding. Through an exploration of the close-knit relationships between language, context, and meaning, it aims to expose the nuanced dynamics of communication and the nature of meaning, contributing to a better understanding of the challenges and possibilities of human communication.

Keywords: Communication, Meaning, Language, Conceptual Scheme, Indeterminacy Thesis

Introduction

Whenever one stumbles across the word communication, what comes to mind is the exchange of ideas. That is to say that communication is always linked with the transfer of ideas between two people or more. Communication is also considered to occur within an individual; here the exchange is not between two subjects, the subject is both receiver and sender. There are quite a number of assumptions about communication, some of which are that it is; a means of expression, a medium of understanding, a means of passing information, the vehicle of language, a fundamental requirement of society. Communication allows for the conveyance of thoughts, emotions, and ideas across various divides: social, cultural, and spatial. While communication is central to man's existence, it is usually faced with barriers impeding understanding amongst people. Language, culture and environment are possible barriers capable of distorting, disrupting, or destroying the process of meaning-making, which is the goal of communication.

In light of the foregoing, this paper raises and attempts to answer some crucial questions about the meaning, nature, and forms of communication, and their relationship with the human subject and how it tries to bridge the communication gap. The paper shall interrogate ideas in linguistics, philosophy, and social theory in the attempt to make sense of the nagging questions of language and communication.

Communication: Meaning and Nature

As with many terms, the term communication has been defined and described by many scholars in different ways such that there is no universal definition. The various definitions and

descriptions of the term are proposed from different perspectives. These definitions all give an insight to understanding the term. The etymology of the word communication is the Latin word 'communicare' meaning transmit, participate, share, exchange, make common, impart (Joshi 1). George Gordon defines communication as "the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols" (par. 1). The Nigerian Institute of Management defines communication as "the exchange of information and feelings through words, actions and objects" (1). Communication may also be defined as the "exchange of ideas, messages and information between two or more persons, through a medium, in a manner that the sender and the receiver understand the message in the common sense, that is, they develop common understanding of the message" (Joshi 1). Communication, according to Samson et al., is:

The exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between persons or among people, and the assignment of meaning to them. It takes place whether the sending of signals is intentional or unintentional. It even takes place when the verbal or nonverbal behaviour is unconscious, as long as it is observed and meaning is assigned to it. Meaning is therefore assigned to verbal and nonverbal behaviour based on one's accumulated experience and understanding (one's mental data bank). To have an effective communication interaction with person/s of another culture, one needs to understand meanings in that culture (22).

We find that these definitions we have noted share a similarity in exchange – in communication something is being exchanged or transferred. It is also clear that these exchanges are carried out or done through different media or mediums such as symbols, words, actions and objects. It goes to say that without a sort of or form of language communication would be impossible. However, language would be of no effect – valueless, if you like – where it fails to communicate meaning or convey information, except of course we subscribe to the idea of a private language which Ludwig Wittgenstein made popular and afterward negated, considering that communication could be intrapersonal; occurring within an individual. What is the private language? The idea behind a private language is that there are certain words internal to an individual expressing the feelings, thoughts, and desires of that individual which cannot be communicated to others. Wittgenstein expresses the idea of a private language in this way, "The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So, another person cannot understand the language" (89). Thus, while a private language may be meaningful on intrapersonal terms, it would be meaningless on the level of interpersonal communication. We can thus consider communication and language to be the two sides of a coin.

Gordon credits Ivor Armstrong Richards for having offered one of the earliest and most superior definitions of communication. For Richards, "Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced and in that other in an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind, and is caused in part by that experience" (par. 3).

From the forgoing, communication produces or invokes a common experience of the idea being communicated – between the sender and the recipient. The idea or message being conveyed becomes common to the parties involved in the exchange. For example: Ujah tells Tomoloju that Idjakpa proposed to Iniobong the night before. The information of Idjakpa's proposal to Iniobong becomes common to Ujah and Tomoloju by means of communication. Ujah must have gotten the information of the proposal also by means of communication – verbal or non-verbal; where Ujah had been told by either Idjakpa or Iniobong, Ujah had gotten the information by verbal communication; on the other hand, where the proposal took place in

Ujah's presence, the information was gotten by means of non-verbal communication. All events or occurrences in society are made possible by means of communication. The foregoing elicits a number of questions: Is it always the case that there is a common experience of the idea being communicated between the sender and receiver? If we answer affirmatively, what accounts for the misunderstanding of information? Can we say an idea has been communicated if the receiver does not understand what the sender of that idea means? What is necessary to ensure that an idea being communicated is fully grasped by the receiver? Is the understanding of the idea being communicated dependent on the sender or the receiver? These are questions to be addressed if the process of communication is to be effective or successful, and they all come under the category of barriers to communication. We shall hereinafter consider some barriers to communication.

Communication has also been defined as a "transactional process in which people create, send, and receive symbolic messages to construct and interpret meaning in a variety of situations and contexts" (The Nature of Communication 3). Communication may also be referred to as the act of "transferring messages from one to another through any medium" (Communication Theory, par. 1). As have been noted earlier, the idea of communication cannot be separated from language for the very reason that communication cannot be done without language and language is meaningless when not communicated. This is where communication serves as the vehicle of language. One of the assumptions about communication as noted earlier is that it is a fundamental requirement of society; man, necessarily needs to communicate with his fellows given that society is the sum total of people who commune with each other and share some common interests and experiences. Without communication, these interests cannot be shared amongst individuals; from antiquity there had always been a need to communicate as communication is the means through which differences are bridged. As an instance, Thomas Hobbes' idea of the state of nature expresses the possible condition within which humans lived prior to when they established an organised way of communicating their ideas, feelings and experiences amongst themselves establishing a civil society within which brute force or might no longer determined their relations with one other.

John Bittner considers communication from an evolutionary perspective, tracing how ways of communicating originated and how newer ways replaced the earliest systems. The earliest humans communicated by means of physical touch, and gradually developed systems of pictographs, symbols, and alphabets (1-2). Bittner posits that a system of communication is one functional requirement of society – communication is indispensable to society's survival and growth. He expresses this idea in this way:

Society's survival and growth depended on a number of things, among them a system of communication through which people could exchange symbols and thus propagate learning at a much accelerated rate; a system of production to create goods and services both for their needs and for barter and exchange; systems of defense to protect their domain against intruders; a method of member replacement sufficient to counteract disease and other elements of member destruction; and a method of social control to maintain order in the society. In the following centuries, each of these functional requirements was, and is still, fulfilled by ever more sophisticated and efficient systems, especially in communication (3).

That all functional requirements of society are fulfilled especially in communication accentuates the importance of communication in society. For how can there be a system of law without it being expressed in a language which in turn is meaningful only when communicated? For this reason, we reiterate the fact that all events, occurrences, activities and systems – of

values, education etc. – are mediated by means of communication. As a medium of understanding, communication enables people know or comprehend the meaning of things, ideas and events around them. This communication is made possible on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mass communication levels. Reverting to the example of the proposal made earlier, communication is what makes a bystander understand the meaning of the proposal – Idjakpa's intention to get married to Iniobong. A better example of how communication is a medium of understanding is where, in a given situation, the words and or actions of an individual are misconstrued causing a dispute, an explanation of the meaning intended by the speaker or actor brings about an understanding in the mind of the recipient. This understanding necessarily quells the dispute originally caused by the mis-construal.

Types of Communication

There are basically two types of communication: the verbal and the non-verbal. Verbal communication involves the transfer of ideas, thoughts, information, and experience with the use of words. In verbal communication, words are employed by means of speaking and writing; here, information is transferred between subjects either orally or by literature (Fatimayin 6). Oral communication may take different forms: conversation or speech; while conversation is the exchange of ideas by two or more people, all of whom participate in talking and listening, a speech is a one-way transfer of ideas from the sender, speaker or encoder to the recipient – listener(s). The second type of verbal communication is the written communication. Here, ideas or information are transferred from the author(s) to the reader(s). There is no direct contact between the encoder and decoder, hence preventing immediate response unlike the conversational type (Nigerian Institute of Management 3).

Non-verbal communication on the other hand does not employ the use of words whether oral or written. It instead employs the use of signs symbols, touch, gestures, and silence (Nigerian Institute of Management 1; Communication Theory, par. 10). Ideas and information are transferred only by means of the aforementioned. Examples of non-verbal communication are traffic, safety, and directional signs. One who understands these signs knows what is required on seeing them.

Forms of Communication

There are basically three forms of communication: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mass communication. However, different literatures identify some more forms to accommodate the peculiarities of their target audience. The Nigerian Institute of Management identifies four forms of communication – the aforementioned and organisational communication (Nigerian Institute of Management 1). Communication theory notes five forms of communication namely: intrapersonal, dyadic, small group, public, and mass communication. It is noteworthy that these five forms of communication can be conveniently categorised under the three we noted earlier. We shall presently identify the differences between them.

Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is considered the most basic form of communication that takes place within an individual. Information or ideas gotten intrapersonally are neither mediated nor known by other individuals – they are private to the individual who is both encoder and decoder. Bittner accounts for intrapersonal communication as the contact of the senses with natural phenomena. For him, the way an individual reacts to natural phenomena is the result of communication within the individual. This is considered the most basic form of

communication without which other forms of communication would not exactly be effective (Bittner 8). This is because all external occurrences or activities are processed within the individual before the individual is prompted to act or communicate with others. As touching the feel of the sun on one's skin, one's skin sends the information of that sensation to one's brain which in turn encodes or interprets the information or data received from the skin. Where one's brain interprets the feel of heat from the sun as favourable, one's brain informs one to remain within the proximity of the heat being emitted by the sun. Thus, when one is presented with a number of information the decision on which information one is to act on is the result of an intrapersonal communication.

Interpersonal Communication

An interpersonal communication is the exchange of ideas, information, and or experiences between two or more people. Once such an exchange does not occur within an individual, it is termed an interpersonal communication (Nigerian Institute of Management 1). Examples of interpersonal communication are discussions or dialogue between people in small groups. Interpersonal communication involves a two-way exchange where each participant is both an encoder and decoder. This form of communication allows immediate feedback; it is a direct responsive form of communication (The nature of communication 10). Interpersonal communication takes place when the parties involved are committed to the communication process of transmitting, receiving and providing feedback. In other words, interpersonal communication is not a soliloquy, but a mutual exchange of ideas.

Mass Communication

This form of communication involves the transfer of ideas and information to a large, dispersed audience. This form of communication offers people in different locations the same information at the same time; it is a wide-range form of communication, the transfer of which is done through various means or media: print media – newspapers, magazines, and books –, social media, and electronic media – radio and television (Bittner 10; The nature of communication 12). Unlike the interpersonal form of communication mass communication does not always allow immediate feedback; in fact, the element of feedback is only immediately possible where recipients are allowed to interact with the mass communicator by means of telephone calls and messages and this is not always the case. Bittner notes however, that feedbacks to mass communicated information is always possible but usually delayed. It is crucial to state that mass communication is made possible only through the media – print, electronic, and social –, hence should be differentiated from an address to a large audience physically situated in one location (10-11).

Principles of Communication

Regardless of the form or medium of communication, there are certain principles that must be adhered to if the intended meaning is to be transmitted. Sarika Joshi highlights seven principles of communication namely: clarity, conciseness, concreteness, correctness, coherence, completeness, and courtesy. The importance of these principles to communication cannot be overemphasised as they determine whether or not the goal of communication is achieved. Every piece of information to be communicated must be clear – free of ambiguities and vague terms.

The principle of conciseness requires that information must be free of superfluous content; the encoder must ensure that the information is not verbose. This principle of conciseness advocates the use of Ockham's razor – expressing ideas in no more words than

necessary. For the goal of communication to be achieved, the encoder should be able to present the information in a way that enables the decoder capture the information clearly; there should be a vivid impression in the mind of the decoder. It is not enough to be able to communicate ideas, but before one communicates an idea, one should be sure that the idea is accurate and free of errors.

The principle of correctness demands that the encoder double-checks the facts of the idea s/he wishes to convey. Where ideas are to be communicated in written form, the sender must ensure that all words are correctly spelt. The principle of coherence states that the ideas expressed or communicated must be rationally linked; ideas must logically follow each other in communication.

Completeness is a very important quality of communication that allows the decoder an understanding of the ideas being conveyed by the encoder, because every detail is included. The principle of completeness forbids the use of ellipsis to the point of distorting the information that the decoder cannot make any sense of it. Courtesy as a principle of communication demands that the encoder's expression in transmitting an idea is respectful, friendly, and void of embarrassment for the decoder (Joshi 4-10).

Communication Barriers and Solutions

Having considered the meaning, forms, and ways by which communication is made possible, it is crucial to note that there are certain factors that pose as barriers to the process of communication. These factors ensure that the goal of communication is not achieved, and having mentioned that communication is crucial to human existence, the question of how the barriers can be overcome to bridge the gap(s) they cause arises. We shall presently consider the various barriers to communication and the ways by which they can be avoided and or overcome. Some barriers to communication are: physical/environmental, language, semantic, psychological, and socio-cultural. For J. R. Could, "Barriers to effective technical communication apply to preparation, language, time and distance, and the human element" (53).

The physical/environmental barrier is that which is caused by our immediate or natural environment, and instruments used in conveying information. A number of factors constitute the physical/environmental barrier. These include: noise – from machines, traffic, and human activity –, defective communication systems that result in communication breakdown or even production of noise instead of conveying information as required, time and distance – the time difference between the preparation of an information and when the information is used or accessed, and information travelling through a distance may be distorted along the way as a result of the various medium or channels through which it is conveyed (Kamath, par. 9; Could 54). Overcoming the physical/environmental barrier is to ensure that all communication is done in a venue free from external noise, that is, the venue information is to be conveyed should be sound-proof. All instruments to be used in the communication process must be confirmed to be in perfect condition to ensure a smooth flow of information. The barrier of time and distance are not particularly easy to overcome; however, they can be limited; where an information has to travel a long distance, there should be a means of facilitating timely arrival. Today, there are communication channels that help to transmit information as fast as the speed of sound – fax, the internet, radio, television etc.

One of the common barriers to communication is language. Where the process of communication is between speakers who do not share a common language, there is bound to be a communication problem as they would need the services of a translator who is proficient in the differing languages. This is a barrier to communication as it slows down the

communication process and sometimes brings about a misunderstanding. To emphasise the problems associated with translation, W. V. O. Quine questions the ability of the translator to grasp the nuances of the language foreign to him to the extent that he can accurately translate sentences to their linguistic equivalence. This position is known as the indeterminacy thesis. Quine states this thesis thus:

Manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose. The firmer the direct links of a sentence with non-verbal stimulation, of course, the less drastically its translations can diverge from one another from manual to manual (24).

Preparation or the lack of it becomes a barrier to communication where the encoder is untrained to convey information to the target audience. Where an encoder of any information lacks proper preparation/training, it is most likely that the encoder's lack would pose a barrier to the communication process; thus, an encoder must be trained on how to execute the conveyance of information to the target audience (Could 54-55). An instance is where an encoder is to convey information to electrical engineers when the encoder is not an electrical engineer, there is bound to be a communication gap as the encoder would not be capable of expressing the ideas using the technical jargons necessary. It becomes imperative that the encoder is trained to master the jargons used in the area of electrical engineering.

The barrier of semantics has to do with the usage of polysemous words – words that have more than one meaning – in expressing ideas (Kamath, par. 11); the decoder faces the difficulty of determining which meaning is intended by the encoder. This barrier can be overcome by the use of words that are monosemous – having one meaning – in the communication process.

The psychological barrier is the barrier to communication caused by one or some mental disposition of the decoder. This barrier is largely dependent on the decoder as it is his disposition that prevents the flow or effectiveness of the communication process. Psychological barrier may be caused by a number of factors: prejudice, emotions, close-mindedness, interests, absent-mindedness etc.; psychological barriers can be overcome if the decoder accepts that he has some mental disturbances, and commits to resolving them (Kamath, par. 12). One way to overcome the psychological barrier is by adopting the phenomenological epoche espoused by Edmund Husserl (34), which is about blocking out one's assumptions and biases in order to better decode and appreciate the encoder's message.

Lastly, socio-cultural barriers are the barriers imposed on the communication process due to the difference in the cultural background of both the encoder and the decoder. Socio-cultural differences pose a barrier to communication because the parties involved in the communication process hold or promote different values, ideas and ideals such that the cultural practices of others are alien to them, and sometimes unacceptable. In Donald Davidson's view socio-cultural barriers are the result(s) of the relativity of reality, hence, the communication process is breached when the realities – social and cultural – of the encoder is different from those of the decoder. These realities are conceptual schemes which according to Davidson are:

Ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes and bits of

knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another (5).

Davidson's idea of conceptual scheme has some resemblance with Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis noted earlier, owing to the fact that they note the challenges of communication amongst people of different cultures and languages. Given that there is a multiplicity of conceptual schemes, there is bound to be a barrier in the communication process among people of different cultures (Rescher 323-324). Davidson notes that partial translation or communication can be managed by employing charity – granting the encoder some reasonableness even though one cannot identify it. This idea implies that one can never fully grasp the ideas expressed by another; hence, the importance of engaging an encoder's ideas as charitable as possible (19). In his words:

Since charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it. Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true, there are no mistakes to make. Charity is forced on us; - whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters. If we can produce a theory that reconciles charity and the formal conditions for a theory, we have done all that could be done to ensure communication. Nothing more is possible, and nothing more is needed (19).

It should be noted that counting others right in most matters in order to understand them does not make them right; hence, this does not solve the barrier problem of communication. To overcome the socio-cultural barrier of communication, parties to a communication process must endeavour to learn and respect the socio-cultural backgrounds of one another. Although, this seems quite sufficient in overcoming the socio-cultural barrier to communication, it is crucial to note that it is not a watertight solution as it slows down the communication problem which may defeat the essence of communication as time may alter the usefulness of information.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we shall reiterate that the importance of communication cannot be overemphasized in society given that all social relations are determined and made possible only by communication. As have been noted, language and communication are inextricably linked to each other; hence, all communication is done in one language or another. We have considered types, forms, and barriers to communication as well as some ways by which barriers can be breached. Despite socio-cultural and language differences, that is, conceptual schemes, humans have found a way of communicating ideas, interests, feelings, and experiences. Without communication there can be no way of coexistence among humans; hence, the importance of strengthening the communication process is invaluable.

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