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A TAXONOMY OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

The purpose for this paper is to further clarify understanding of human communication. The main assertion is that all human communication may usefully be seen to belong to three and only three types: disclosure, directive, and description. The support offered is rational and intuitive. What is presented here is intended to be highly consistent within itself; it is also intended to be grounded in common sense with you as hearer as witness to that. The relevance intended is that by shedding light on the situation, the possibilities of human communication may be enhanced.

A Theory of Man

Fundamental to this discussion is the image of man presumed. It is here posited that man is a three-fold being, each part making possible a separate function. Man is a feeling, thinking and acting being. Though these are analyzed as three, it is important to see that they are integrated; one performs one function only in connection with the other two. Thus when one feels or desires, one also thinks and prepares for action. When one thinks, one also feels or desires and prepares for action.

When one acts, one is also feeling and thinking.

It is the feeling aspect which is most distinctive about man. A gearchain reacts to its environment by receiving power, acting to increase or to decrease that power with a corresponding change in velocity. A computer reacts to its environment by receiving data then outputting transformed data; it may be said to think and to act, though that thinking is surely less than the human kind. A human being receives input from many feeling sources, then creates a desire which is not simply a function of that input. A human being receives data about the world from many sources, then combines these to create a special personal construct of the universe. Feeling and thinking then combine to produce action. Feeling provides the *what* of action, thinking provides the *how* of action, and action delivers what feelings desire and the mind conceives.

Man is here considered to be free. He chooses his desires, his thoughts and his actions. His environment provides limits within which he functions, but what and how he acts within those limits is his choice. The purpose of receiving communication is to become aware of the possibilities for action and the limits of those possibilities. The purpose of sending communication is to act upon the universe to transform it into a place more compatible with one's personal desires.

The challenge for every human being is to communicate with sufficient effectiveness and efficiency that one becomes satisfied with what he creates through his own communication. It seems that one can do this best when his feelings and thoughts correspond with the way the universe really is, and when his actions are an integrated and effective force to change the universe in the direction he thinks is better. Sometimes we desire, but our thoughts and actions cannot deliver what we desire. Sometimes we desire and then are repelled by that which we thought we desired. Human life is the attempt to create in ourselves an integrity of feeling, thought and action which accords with the reality of the universe and which enables us to create those satisfactions which we seek.

It may be said that a human being is under control when his thinking and acting are consistent with his feeling. The possibility of that consistency is the possibility of man's freedom. Gaining that consistency is a skill learning which men gain only through such concerted effort in correct practice.

A Definition of Communication

Human communication is assumed to be dyadic: it may always be analyzed as the relationship between two and only two persons. Communication is here defined as the effect of A upon B. Human communication is the effect of person A upon any B, be it person, place or thing. Fully human communication is the effect person A has on person B. This communication may be isolated for a specific short time interval

or it may be summed over an extended period of time. Normally communication is reciprocal: person A affects person B, then person B affects person A. Mass communication is the effect person A has on many persons B, but each case may be analyzed individually.

This definition allows both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. No attempt is here made to catalog all of the possible ways in which one person may affect another, but there are two examples which are noteworthy. Person A may affect person B by not sending a message at time T. Person A may affect person B by not growing, not becoming more capable, thus not affecting person B in the manner that would have been possible had A changed as was possible.

This definition is seen to be the broadest possible definition of communication. Any not so inclusive could not be used to give a full account of the communication situation. The concepts of message and meaning are not used in it even they are important to most communication. They are elements which are projected by a speaker and constructed by a hearer, but which never are assuredly common to both speaker and hearer, as we shall see below.

A Model of the Human Communication Process

We assume for our model of human communication that we begin *in medias res*. We take person A as he exists in the world, having received much communication from other human beings, having decoded that with some success; having well-formed opinions about the persons who communicate with him and about the world and the universe, and having some fairly definite ideas as to just what changes he wishes to effect in the world.

Person A is seen to be doing three things more or less simultaneously and continuously. First, person A is translating the verbal messages of others. To do this he creates an hypothesis as to the intent of a given speaker, then fleshes out that hypothesis according to the verbal-cultural context which unites person A and the speaker which he is translating. This is a creative, willful act for which he is responsible. This translating or decoding is essentially but not exclusively a function of the thinking of person A. That is to say, this translating reflects what he believes the person he is translating to have said; but it does not necessarily reflect what he believes the person he is translating to have meant. True meaning comes in assessment.

Person A is also assessing the nature of the world around him. He assesses the persons whom he translates, and decides whether they are trustworthy or not, whether they speak ironically or not, etc. Thus he decides what they really mean by what they have said. He assesses the total social context, the verbal and physical messages he has received and is receiving from all persons. He assesses the physical environment as to what it was, is, and portends. All of this assessing is the creature of the imagination of person A. Though he works with abundant input, the output of his assessment is of his own making. This assessing is essentially but not exclusively a function of the feeling of person A. That is to say, it reflects his desires.

The third function which person A is continually doing is forming intents or intentions. Out of what he has translated others to have said, and out of his assessment of what they really meant and his assessment of the past, present and future of the state of the world, person A is preparing to act to affect the world, either by speaking or not speaking, or by acting physically or not acting physically. That intention reflects the desires of person A and his thinkings, but is essentially the action part of his nature. Once the intention is formed, the actions of person A begin to reflect his intent.

The translations, assessments and intents of person A are the thrust of his personality in the world. The manifestations of that thrusting are the actual actions of the person, their intentions reflected in speaking and acting. According to the best of his skill, person A translates his intentions into code or act. He may act honestly or deceitfully, selfishly or selflessly, but in any case his words and acts taken as a whole and over time reflect whatever his intentions are, be they honorable or dishonorable, skillful or artless. Speech code or action, all that person A does is relevant to a cultural context, and the translation he makes of his intent is projected into that context. The context has some physical existence, but its principal existence is in the minds of the hearers or observers of person A.

In addition to the cultural context, the speech code or action also exists in and acts in a physical

environment. Sign language in the dark or conversation by a waterfall are typical cases where communication or effect is lessened by the environment. The use of a megaphone or of video transmission are cases where the code and acts of person A are enhanced in their effect by the environment. The environment also provides referents which affect the interpretation of the code and/or act by the hearer, such as the presence of a charging bull when the cry goes out "Watch out for the bull!"

At this stage of communication, everything that remains is the responsibility of the hearer. The hearer must now perform his three functions. First he will translate any code into a message, using his understanding of the cultural context plus his personal knowledge of the speaker. Second he will assess the situation to decide what the speaker really meant, whether the speaker speaks truthfully or meaningfully, and the net import of what the speaker literally says but really means in the context of the physical environment. Third, the hearer will create out of his translations, assessments and desires his own intentions, what he will say and/or do to try to push the world in the "right" direction. As with person A, person B is creative about each of these three steps. He creates a literal interpretation of person A's words and acts, he creates an assessment as to the true meaning and import, and he creates an intention to affect the world in some manner so it will become more to his liking, all done as a creative reaction to the universe.

Person B then encodes his intent, using the cultural context, and projects that code into the physical environment. Another person, perhaps person A, then decodes, assesses and forms another intention. Thus the process of communication is a constant reverberation of codes and acts among feeling, thinking, acting creative individuals.

The Taxonomy of Human Communication

Having laid the groundwork which was necessary, we may now proceed to make explicit the taxonomy of human communication which is the heart of this paper.

It is posited that all human communication may profitably be classified in one of three basic types. These types match the functions of man. Thus, representing the feeling aspect of man we shall designate a category to be known as "disclosure". Representing the thinking aspect of man we designate a category known as "description". Representing the acting aspect of man we designate a category known as "directive."

Disclosures may be subdivided into four main types, these types being more representative than exhaustive. First is the subtype of expression, such as "I feel ill." Second is the subtype of value judgments, such as "What a beautiful sunset." Third are plans, such as "I'm going to run for governor." Finally we have preferences, such as "I really prefer a little less winter in the climate."

Descriptions may also be placed in four subtypes, these here intended to be both representative and exhaustive. The first subtype is that of fact, which is a description or classification of a phenomenon which is present in the physical environment of the speech act describing it. An example of a factual type assertion would be "This dog has a broken leg." Second is the subtype of law; a law-like assertion is one which is an induction from many related factual assertions. For example, after observing many dogs with broken legs, one might assert that "Injuries of this sort are readily healed with proper care." The third subtype is that of theory, which is a wholly or partly fictional account created to make sense of the facts and laws of an area of thought. An example of such a useful fiction is Newton's idea of gravity. Gravity is never perceived, and it is quite possible that no such thing exists, but until we can do better it provides a useful mental image. The fourth subtype of descriptive assertion is that of principle. A principle is a fundamental postulate of thought which aids in the construction of theories and in the explanation of laws and facts. An example of a principle is Newton's idea that to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Each kind of descriptive assertion may be used in the form of an hypothesis, which is an assertion of a fact, law, theory or principle which is seriously proposed for acceptance but which as yet lacks the necessary basis for acceptance. The basis for acceptance of a hypothetical fact is a pertinent observation. The basis for the acceptance of a hypothetical law is a series of observations of the phenomenon described by the proposed law, which series vindicates the statement as a reliable generalization. The basis for the acceptance of a hypothetical theory is its usefulness in forming a

basis for deducing the accepted laws of an area and for leading to hitherto unobserved facts and laws. The basis for acceptance of principle is the usefulness such an hypothesis shows as a fundamental postulate in a useful body of thought. Needless to say, theoretical assertions and principles cannot be proved to be true.

The third basic type of assertion, that of directive, may also usefully be divided into four subtypes. The first subtype is non-verbal, and will be called "art." This subtype includes all of those things which a human being may do physically to change the world around him. This area is subject to the laws of physics, wherein every effect must have a sufficient cause. Examples of this subtype are piano playing, carpentry, skydiving, sculpture and disguise. The next three subtypes are verbal forms, encompassing command, questions and definitions. In each of these verbal forms of directive the speaker is attempting to change the universe by using words only, leaving it to others to supply the force which physics requires for changes. In commands, person A tells person B what to do, how to move his muscles. In questions, person A is directing someone to make an appropriate response. In definitions, person A is directing how a certain symbol must or may be used. What all directive communications have in common is an attempt to change the nature of the world.

It is posited that every communication, verbal or non-verbal, may be formed into an assertion, which is a complete sentence expressing the hearer's hypothesis as to what the initiator of the communication intends. Where no assertion can be formed, the observer or hearer has no understanding, correct or incorrect, to attach to the observation. Thus every communication can be interpreted in the form of an assertion.

By examining cases we observe that all assertion may be properly categorized as being primarily disclosures, descriptions, or directives. But we further observe that every assertion may also be interpreted as representing the other two types as well as its primary type. In fact, it appears that a formulation of all three forms of the assertion is necessary to establish complete meaning. Thus "meaning" is taken to be a resonance among the three types of assertions wherein each is represented in different strengths according to the interpretation of the hearer. Just as intent involves feeling, thinking and acting, so interpretation involves attribution of feeling, thinking and acting as the hearer attempts to recreate the speaker's intent.

Examples are necessary at this point. If a speaker says "You're all right," after assessment we may form a disclosure assertion such as "I like you." But also meant will be a description, such as "I believe you are a reliable person." and a directive such as "You: believe that I esteem you."

If the original code is such as "Utah is a western state," we have an assertion that is primarily a description. This may also be decoded and assessed as a disclosure: "I believe that Utah is a western state," and as a directive: "You: believe that Utah is a western state." This resonance becomes more apparent when we move to the realm of theory. If the original code is "Man evolved from a lower form of life," the disclosure might be "I am convinced that man evolved from a lower form of life," and the directive would be "You: believe also that man evolved from a lower form of life."

If the original code is such as "Stand up," we have a typical command form directive. But it also may be represented after assessment by the disclosure form: "I want you to stand up," and the descriptive form: "You are a person who should stand up."

Conclusions

1. Communication may be enhanced by understanding the resonance nature of meaning. 2. Assertions are better formed from assessments than from decodings, and that intent is more truly captured in assessments. 3. It is claimed that gods, little children and dogs understand principally by assessments, therefore interpret more effectively than those who do not recognize deceptive coding.