A process by which signals, data, information or knowledge is transferred from one location to another. Usually this involves a sending agent, a transmission mechanism, and one or more receiving agents. Communication can take place between people - for example, one person talking to another. It can also take place between people and the various other types of object that they use, such as computers and mobile phones. Often, the use of technology to support communication between people is often referred to as technology-mediated communication. Communication can also take place between different types of machines, particularly computers. (Barker, 2010)

Over the years, different approaches have attempted to delineate an inclusive definition of this pervasive human phenomenon. In the twentieth century, communication was studied mostly in terms of language and in connection with the philosophical definition of meaning and sense. The semiotic approach placed an emphasis on meaning, since it considered the construction of sense as the basis of the whole communication process. In this perspective, communication is essentially the ability to create new meanings (Ogden and Richards 1923). The key point was reference, which is the process that made it possible to establish a relation between objects, wherein one object (sign) designates, connects, or links to another object (referent). In linguistics, words and gestures were a perfect example of signs, since they referred to real entities without having any direct relation with them. This approach presents some problematic points regarding human communication, as was pointed out by Frege (1892). He argued that reference cannot be treated as identical with meaning. He used the famous example of 'Hesperus' (ancient Greek name for the evening star) and 'Phosphorus' (ancient Greek name for the morning star): both refer to Venus but with two functional and informative meanings. However, the key point was that it was definitely established that human beings use signs, which have a merely conventional relation with the represented object. The conventional meaning, in its double facet of a signifier and the signified, is only defined in a system of signs, since it is completely conventional regarding reality.

One of the most prominent American linguists of the twentieth century, Bloomfield (1933), developed a general and comprehensive theory of language by creating a formal procedure for the analysis of language and by providing a rigorous scientific methodology that was able to describe the communication process. For Bloomfield, the structure of language represents the central object of linguistic study and it is seen as a closed code that is bounded by formal rules that are applicable to every utterance. This rigorous methodology found concrete expression in the model of communication by Shannon and Weaver (1949). From this viewpoint, communication is seen as the transmission of information through a specific channel from an information source, which produces a message, to a receiver, who decodes the original message. To illustrate this model, consider Juliet in Shakespeare’s romantic tragedy. An information source (Juliet) produces a signal (the sentence ‘Romeo, Romeo, why do you have to be who you are?’) by a transmitter (Juliet's voice). This signal is carried through a particular channel (the air through which sound propagation occurs) to a receiver (Romeo) who, thanks to his receptor (his acoustic apparatus), can finally receive the original signal. It is noteworthy that, in this model, the meaning of every communicative interaction is always established a priori. This means that, if any trouble occurs during the transmission of the information, the meaning of the message created by the source always corresponds to the meaning of the message the receiver obtains.

Starting in the 1960s, some philosophers of language (Austin 1962; Grice 1975, 1989; Searle 1979b) advanced criticisms of the information transmission model. These philosophers proposed a new model of the thought processes that are involved in human communication, the so-called inferential model. The starting point was the penetrating observation that language cannot always be seen merely as a code with specified symbols and meanings: human communication is not reducible to a simple coding/decoding process. By contrast, communication represents a complex phenomenon consisting of several aspects that are neglected by the information transmission model. Some of these aspects involve the previous knowledge of interlocutors, a speaker’s communicative intentions in producing a message and the inferential processes which are activated for the
comprehension of a *speech act*. In the inferential model, communication can be defined as a form of social cooperative interaction among people who would like to share, and make common, part of their knowledge with one or more individuals (Grice 1975). This theoretical perspective marks the onset of *pragmatics*, which is a discipline that is focused on the communicative meaning that an utterance can assume in the specific *context* in which it is proffered (Bosco et al. 2004). Communication is more than a simple sum of words that is transmitted by a source to a receiver: it is the combined effort of the interlocutors, who actively engage in a continuous co-construction of meanings.

Viewing human communication as the continuous co-construction and negotiation of meanings makes it rather different from *animal communication*, for example, in which a message corresponds necessarily to a pre-specified meaning. This important difference can perhaps be explained in the light of a human cognitive ability that is absent in animals, called *theory of mind*. This is the ability to ascribe mental states, such as beliefs, intentions and desires, to oneself and to others and to use knowledge of these states to predict and explain one's own and other people's behaviour (Premack and Woodruff 1978). Some authors (e.g. Hurford et al. 1998) have proposed continuity between the evolution of cognitive, social and communicative skills in humans and those of our primate relatives, even if many authors affirm that human beings are unique in their ability to develop a theory of mind (Premack and Premack 1994; Heyes 1998).

The relation between human communication and theory of mind represents a fundamental and still ongoing controversy. For some authors (e.g. Bloom 2002), pragmatic ability is part of a more general theory of mind skill, as when people communicate they have to actively attempt to figure out the meaning that they intend to express to another. This is particularly evident in children when they have to learn the names of things, not simply by associating the sounds of words with objects (Birch and Bloom 2002), but rather by making *inferences* about the speaker's intended meaning. Other perspectives (e.g. Sperber and Wilson 2002) argue that while pragmatics is similar to theory of mind in that it involves the attribution of mental states, it represents a distinct module at the cognitive level with its own peculiar principles and mechanisms that evolved as a specialization of a more general mind-reading module. The debate is still open but theory of mind, if it is considered alone, seems unable to explain people's ability to communicate (see Vallana et al. 2007; Tirassa and Bosco 2008).

Even though language is the most studied means of communication, it is only one of the multiple channels through which communication can be achieved. Alternative expressive means are represented by gestures, painting, and any other actions that are performed with communicative intention. In particular, the extra-linguistic modality represents the most ancient way of communicating from a phylogenetic perspective and the most precocious expressive means from an ontogenetic perspective in human beings. Traditionally, it has been proposed (Hinde 1972) that there is a clear distinction between verbal and nonverbal communication that is based on the different channels through which these forms of communication are realized. As Bara and Tirassa (1999) noted, this distinction is not comprehensive and contains many contradictions. For example, following the traditional distinction, the Braille system or sign language - languages totally structured and regulated by syntactic and semantic rules as in spoken language - have to be included in nonverbal communication. By contrast, aspects of communication such as *prosody*, which is something spoken but which does not involve any structure or rule, is seen as verbal communication. Thus, the traditional distinction seems to be focused on the more superficial aspects of communication and omits the most important differences between the two forms of communication. Bara and Tirassa (1999) proposed a different classification that is based not on the type of input (verbal versus nonverbal) but on the way through which humans elaborate communicative data. Linguistic communication is performed using a system of compositional symbols, whereas extralinguistic communication is the use of a set of associable symbols. Therefore, in this view, the Braille system and sign language are considered a linguistic form of communication because they comprise elementary units that can be combined in infinite ways, whereas body movements as well tone of voice are considered extralinguistic forms of communication.

During a communicative exchange, in both linguistic and extralinguistic modalities, paralinguistic aspects are also present. These aspects can be considered tributary communication structures, since they do not have an autonomous meaning but they are better understood as qualifiers of communicative actions. Paralinguistic communication includes all of those aspects that accompany, qualify, and structure linguistic and extralinguistic communication. For example, the utterance 'It's 5 o'clock' can have different communicative meanings based on the paralinguistic elements used. Uttered with an annoyed tone of voice, it would probably mean 'Unfortunately, it is still 5 o'clock, time never passes ...', whereas with an excited tone it would probably mean 'It is already 5 o'clock! We have to hurry up!'. Traditionally, the term 'paralinguistic' refers to tributary language structures and, in particular, to prosodic cues such as the intonation, rhythm, and voice quality (tone, pitch, and intensity) that accompany speech. However, it is also noteworthy that extralinguistic communication is often accompanied by paralinguistic modifiers, such as kinesics and proxemics. Kinesics includes, for instance, head signs, facial expressions, body movements, and ocular movements; proxemics refers to posture and interpersonal distance. Some authors (McNeill and Duncan 1999) have rejected the language/paralanguage distinction, theorizing that gestures, broadly construed to include prosodic and rhythmic phenomena, iconic gestures, non-representational movements of the hands and body, are intrinsic to language. In this view, language is an organized form of online, interactive, embodied, and contextualized human cognition.

To conclude, communication represents a complex activity that characterizes human beings and their method of conveying and sharing meanings. Communication is realized through linguistic, extralinguistic and paralinguistic modalities, which enable us to
express beliefs, opinions, ideas, and desires to others. Moreover, the variety of communicative modalities and elements enables us to create an infinite number of new messages and to use the same utterance to convey very different meanings.

See also: Cognitive pragmatics; competence, communicative; competence, pragmatic; context; conversation; cooperative principle; development, pragmatic; discourse; inference; inferential comprehension; intentionality; language evolution; rehabilitation, communication; sharedness; utterance interpretation

Suggestions for further reading


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