Definition: Communication from Dictionary of Information Science and Technology

Communication is 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)

Summary Article: Communication
From The Pragmatics Encyclopedia

Communication is a social process that requires the participation of two or more persons. It involves the human ability to use abstract concepts in order to affect the actions and thinking of other individuals. The term ‘communication’, which is from the Latin term ‘communicare’, literally means to make common, share, participate, or impart. Communication indicates a sense of commonness with others by sharing information, signals, and messages. Human beings are intrinsically communicative subjects. They are social beings that have evolved with the necessity to establish relationships with other members of their living group and, in order to make this possible, they have to share ideas, projects, desires, knowledge, and so forth (Tirassa et al. 2006a, 2006b; Tirassa and Bosco 2008).

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

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
time 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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