FACE —TO — FACE INTERACTION :
A Probe Into Processes of Communication*

These days many people, specially in the West, have been associating the term ' communication ' with the massive communication technology, particularly with information retrieval systems handled through computers and other sophisticated devices. No doubt, rapid strides in electronics in recent decades have revolutionized the means of communication.

At the same time, we need not loose the sight of the humanistic perspective of communications, which has a rich tradition dating back more than two thousand years in the Indian and Greek schools of philosophy.[1] To cite an example, Bhartrhari's philosophy of *sphota*—'explosion', that is, the ultimate in language, stresses the point that verbal and non-verbal signals *evoke* a situation of reality, just as throwing a pebble in a pond causes ripples to grow.[2] These ripples can be characterised by several elements of the scene, such as the weight and shape of the pebble, the force of the thrower and his or her distance from the pond, the depth of water, and the direction and velocity of the wind.

Many such enquiries in communication got later identified with aesthetics—poetiry, drama, and literary appreciation with emphasis on *excellence*, something said exceptionally well or artfully. These pursuits have largely been concerned with the *content* or substance of communication such as, acquisition of speaking and writing skills, that is, oratory, diction, etc., acquisition of communication skills in the field of pedagogy limited to mechanical proficiency in basic requirements of grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation, etc.

Resent interests generated through cross-cultural studies in social psychology, linguistics, and language teaching have focused the fundamental issues of communication by probing into the processes of face-to-face communication, in a search for the

'primitives' (or microcosms) of modern communications amplified through technological means.[3]

Interpreting Messages

Communication, in this context, includes all behaviour, not just verbal. Birdwhistell rightly points out : " Man is a multisensorial being, occasionally he verbalises."[4]

Communication as a complex embodiment of signaling conventions is manifested in language activity through the interplay of three major factors—formal, institutional, and pragmatic-that requires a speaker to operate in various speech matrices. The writer has discussed at length elsewhere[5] a three-dimensional model for probing language communications : the *cognition* dimension chalks out a broad " blueprint " of the verbal activity, the *identity* dimension provides " specificational " propriety, details to the blueprint, and the *focus* dimension heightens compatibility, in a way " filters " differential values over the specified details of the blueprint in a speech act. In language activity one finds characteristics of different dimensions flowing simultaneously into one another, responsive to differences of density as in osmosis. Often, it is difficult to isolate elements as belonging exclusively to one or the other dimension.

A speech event carries a " formal " meaning within sentence-unit (s) signifying subject, predicate, etc.; a " specificational " meaning within a context — conditioned by interactional roles, setting, ceannel, etc.; and an " affective " meaning within the discourse, emerging from the *relevance* of interaction. Winograd observed, " A sentence does not ' convey ' meaning the way a truck conveys cargo, complete and packaged. It is more like a blueprint that allows the hearer to reconstruct the meaning from his own knowledge."[6]

Speech behaviour, in a sense, can be paralleled with a mapping activity, the full significance of which can be explicated only by the imperatives of context and communicative tasks. Speech becomes understandable only in connection with social interactions, situational expediency, and the purpose of comunication.[7] In a way, interpreting the constituent units in a speech act bears a great similarity to interprting the legend on a map. "The embeddedness of speech in interactive processes makes social meaning reflexive or indexical," according to Giglioli.[8]

In short, a message conveys meaning not merely through its "signification" in isolation (as indexed in the dictionary), but in the context of its "identity" and through its "affect" on the participants. Hence, communication studies should be concerned with what *transpires* from at speech event, not merely with what it *signifies*. Such interchange model focuses on multi-way, interactive, participatory communication processes, leading to "the *generating of new messages* as contrasted to the transmission of source -prepared messages.".[9] On the inferential plane, it can be claimed that no intetrction starts with a clean slate; every message is prevalued (to begin with) and revalued (after the event).

Processes of Interaction

Studies of interpersonal communication are primarily addressed to the task of understanding the processes of interaction between two or more individuals, that is, what goes on inside and between the participants: and such studies emphasize the relationship emerging among communicators, rather than the content. Interpersonal communication can be distinguished from group communication on the basis of the purpose or predilections of the communicators.

An interpersonal encounter is characterized by the sharing of interests, opinions, and feelings among the participants, and the nature of the interaction depends upon the degree of willingness

—to lend an ear to one another (that is, participant's attractions for one another)

—to accept the other on his or her own terms (through curiosity about the unexpected, that is, serendipity)

—to put forth one's own efforts to explicate the message (through synergy)

—to disclose one's-self (through sharing).

A group communication, on the other hand, is characterized by participants who have a group identity, who are related to one another on the basis of their roles in a formal structure oriented to a specific purpose. The nature of group communication depends on the degree of observance of agenda, procedure, propriety, and other aspects of group dynamics.

The Japanese, in interpersonal as well as in group communication, are known to cherish keen sensitivity about nurturing the

concept of *amae*, that is seeking to protect a relationship (through mutual desire for a smooth transaction).[10] Thus, Japanese encounters are generally conducive to ambiguity, to seeking clues that would make the speech event most congenial. Speech is noteworthy for what it conceals as much as for what it reveals. The reflexive (non-rational) use of language is characterized by implicit regulation depending on reference or peer group pressures, suggestion, and covert design.[11]

As human beings, there are many experiences that we do share and that are different for all of us. At the individual level these different experiences are identified as personality traits and at the collective level these are known as cultural traits—"the habits of everyday life, the cues to which people respond, the automatic reactions they have to whatever they see and hear."[12] An Indian philosopher, Kodanda Rao, pointed to the fundamental fallacy of talking about Western and Eastern cultures as though they represented thoroughly 'objective' realities—each with a distinguishable and constant pattern, organically correlated with areas, races, or nations. He remarked: "There has been one Culture in the world. It consists of an ever-increasing number of individual cultural traits, each of which was invented, not by a national, racial or geographical group, but by an individual person, sometime, somewhere, and which diffused from the inventor to other individuals, for or near, fast or slow. Each cultural trait has its own range of diffusion.[13]

Thus the native worldview or, in terms of Barnlund, the assumptive world of an individual, is very much a psychological reality: "Each man, then creates a world of his own, not the same world that other men occupy.......The world each man gets inside his head is the only world in which he lives. It is this symbolic world, not the real world that we talk about, argue about, fight about, and so on." [14] Barnlund further observed: "Every communicative act, interpersonal or intercultural, is a transaction, then, between two private worlds."[15] Hayakawa also emphasized that each individual has own way of extracting meaning from the world around him. The self-concept, in a sense, creates for each of us a unique environment in which to react."[16]

The demands of global instantaneousness in the transmission of information through mass media are bringing to the forefront

the crucial issues of interpreting language differences in 'meaning' (that is, the interplay of intent, identity, and affect as pointed out above). " Until recently, the focus in intercultural communication was on errors, mistakes, barriers, breakdowns and a long list of other negatives."[17] In cross-purpose encounters as well as in cross-cultural settings one often notices that some message is communicated, but perhaps not the one intended. Barriers to communication are often highlighted through the difficulties people have in understanding one another if they do not have a language or experiences in common. But one generally fails to identify the miscues in communication that arise from the lack of interest or divergent values and attitudes in an interaction.

Communication Orchestra

Over time, each of various disciplines has provided a different thrust and new impetus to communication studies. This in itself is good evidence of the multilateral nature of communication. The multifaceted character of a communicative act can, at best, be compared to an orchestra in which all symbolic systems--utilizing verbal and nonverbal cues, roles and identities of participants, conscious attitudes and unconscious moods, valued structures, imperatives of space and time, intensity of involvement, etc-play their part in realizing a message. Scholars in different branches of knowledge, involving social development, cultural values, psychological realities, kinesics, linguistic meaning, information processing, rhetorics, aesthetics, and mass media technology, have been engaged in highlighting different facets of communication. At times, many communication studies, exclusively concerned with the immediate application of their findings at the global level and without a wider perspective of communication phenomena at the human level, remind one of the parable of the blind men and elephant. The blind men determined the reality from hasty examination of only one or more parts (identifying them as pillars, walls, fans, etc.) but missed the organic whole, the elephant. In the pursuit of knowledge, the isolation of a phenomenon under study by controlling its variables has long been recognized as a legitimate means of inquiry, but when it comes to introducing drastic changes in human behaviour *deliberately*, then we must consider the issue in a wider perspective and with an *integrative* approach.

Communication needs to be looked into as a multivariable,

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dynamic interplay of numerous elements. It is primarily a *synergistic* system in which the elements operate in an interdependent and intricate fashion, adjusting to the imperatives of time and space. For example, in oral communication one raises or lowers his or her pitch to adjuct to the distance, one smoothens the rhythm in baby talk, or one enunciates speedily when giving a commentary on the exciting moments of a football game.

As pointed out above, communication in its rudimentary sense is built on multiple and overlapping signaling devices so that its interpretation does not have to be tagged with *one and only one* signaling system. Such communication, integrated in a three-dimensional everyday life reality, thrives on *redundancy*—thus providing more than one cues for information retrieval even in the most unattended circumstances, and utilizing the repetitive variables for further manipulation to generate still more intricate signals. For example, one makes overt use of redundancy (that is, one repeats himself through verbal and/or facial expressions, parallel gestures, etc.) When adjusting to the cultural or experiential gap of the other participant in a communication dyad. Through its rhetorical use (that is, implicative suggestion, as discussed below) one can also camouflage or 'whitewash' reality—softening techniques often utilized in "performing a role" under institutional constraints by indulging in "correct" etiquette but illusive in intent.

Any communicative act potentially has multiple interpretations as the perceived relalities may differ from the objective reality As Berlo puts it: "Meanings are in people, not in the messages."[13]

As early as two thousand years ago, Patanjali in the *Mahābhāsya* had pointed out to this reality: "Meaning is not to be produced by a word, but a word is to be produced by a meaning".[1] Several treatises of " Hindu grammarians " regard *dhvani* (implicative suggestion, inference) as a crucial factor in interpreting the message. According to the *dhvani* philosophy, utterances or thier components can be identified with three primary functions, known as *guṇa* (power or potency) :

> —*abhidhā* (referential), factive signification,
> supported by other cues leading to explicit agreement
> *lakasṇā* (indicatory), an extension of the routinized

attributes (such as figurative exaggeration, e.g., "stone-hearted," cliches, metaphor)

vyanjanā (reflected), implicative image realized by sharing a focus or comunicative field ("reading' between the lines, "You know what I mean ").

When speech serves the reflected function, the context, the speaker, the listener, and the utterance, all conjointly may co-operate to produce a "suggestion". The utterance "It's past five" could imply " Let's go home " or " No further hope of getting any message "; or it can be stretched to mean " Be prepared for the risk ", and so on. Verbalization in this context serves as a peg on which to hang something else.

In the implicative sense, there is no fixed meaning to an utterance. Speech evokes ideas, images, and other introspective experiences in the mental system of the hearer that often remains vague and indeterminate. Ambiguity becomes a vitrtue in such interpersonal communication settings.

Communications at the interpersonal level utilize language as an infinitely subtle, flexible, and powerful instrument to cope with the endless variety and diversity of facts. Every utterance as an active force consists of two aspects: dictum, or content, usually is explicit; modus, or assertion of the dictum, generally remains implicit.

	Modus	Dictum
" It is raining. "	I affirm,	it is raining.
" It is not raining. "	I deny,	it is raining.

Every speech act is endowed with an intrinsic purpose. As pointed out above, communication at the interpersonal level generally transpires through the evocation of mental imageries in in a dyad. There is no mechanistic transfer of information, that is, the " sending and receiving " of the meessage like a postal delivery, as such. But more, appropriately, one can describe the process as the " releasing and catching " of the message, regulated by the vagaries of space and time and by the indeterminacies, attitudes and backgrounds of the participants. For example, in a music lesson, a fifty - year-old man's bass voice is not acoustically much like a five-year-old girl's treble : but if they speak the same language, the former can correct the latter by telling her to imitate him: " Say it like this ! " She makes

quite different noises by which he recognizes that she has obeyed him.[20]

Twin Criteria of Communicability

The degree of communicability in a given setting is highly dependent upon :

—the reciprocity of language skills among communicators (spread over a speech cpectrum comprising one or more languages, dialects, styles, etc.)

—the mutuality of focus (that is, sharing the *relevance* of the setting, commonly known as attitudes, moods, or feelings of the participants.)

Communications in everyday life are based on the *synergistic* relationship between the twin criteria, that is, one harmoniously blending with the other. When a communication is based exclusively on the homogeneity of language skills, it tends to be mechanistic (in a way, less humanistic). On the other hand, when it is totally dependent on the perfect fit of moods and feelings, it can be described as rapport. Many language-standardizing agencies, in evaluating the efficiency of communications, tend to be concerned exclusively with the homogeneity of the language skills, yet this is only one factor, although no doubt a significant one, in human communications.

The main processes of exchanging (releasing and catching) messages in interpersonal encountersare described as follows :

1. **Agreement** : When communicator ONE releases X and communicator TWO catches. X:

   ONE———→X   ONE : " What is your name ?"
   :   TWO : " My *name* is Jyoti ".
   X   ——→TWO

Communicability in this encounter is acquired through routine " formula "—type learning.

2. **Overlapping exchange** : When associative images of two communicator overlap, communicator one releases X_1, which for communicator TWO signifies X_2:

   ONE——→X1   " **Good afternoon** ", signifying " greetings
   .   after 12·00 noon " for one, and " greetings
   .   after lunch " for another.
   X_2 ——→TWO

Individual or ad hoc agreement among communicators is retrieved from the linguistic or eaxtra-linguistic " redundant " cues, which synchronize with the speech event and help in inferring most favourable association to the verbal exchange through communicative sensitivity.

3. **Contradictory exchange :** When two communicators, through different experiences, associate the same speech act with clashing images; communicator ONE releases X but communicator TWO catches Y :

> ONE——→X   " **First floor** " for an Englishman signifies
> · " one floor above the ground", whereas for an
> · American it means " a floor on the ground
> · level. "
>
> Y ——→TWO

The indeterminacy of factive communication in such cases is often resolved from redundant cues in the speech event, or by looking for cultural streotypes (such as, in the above example to guess whether one is an Asian speaker educated in England or in America), or through further elititation. Communicability in this context will depend largely upon the amount of *synergy* one is willing to put forth to explicate the message from the speech event.

4. **Non-anticipatory exchange :** At the technological level, one regards all unintended or unexpected results of communication as " distortions ". (Those who are concerned only with factive aspects of communication treat this phenomenon as " non-communication ".) But interpersonal communication abound in this type of exchange, where in response to one communicator's release of X, the other returns an unanticipated P :

> ONE——→X   ONE :   " Would you like to have coconut ?"
> · TWO :   " Yes, *coke*, please. "
> · ONE :   (Puzzled) !!
>
> P——→TWO
> Q←——TWO
> ·
> ·
>
> (!!)ONE←——Q

One is rather amused by such unanticipated responses. When the mutuality of focus is strong in a speech event, one is prepared by feelings of serendipity to accept such " by the way " facts as a bonus, to condone factive indeterminacies when these do not serve any crucial function in the message, and, if necessary, to put forth an extra amount of synergy by discreate inferences most favourable to the speech event.

5. **Improvised exchange** : in everyday life situations, a reponse to a speech act does not necessarily assume that each and every syllable uttered has been identified and meticulously decoded. A speech event can be aptly characterized as a " guessing game " in which an exchange is carried out to mutual satisfaction. The comminicators retain the most prominent cues (verbal or non-verbal) of the speech event and fill in the rest (that is, by improvising the predictable ascociative cues), by putting forth the necessary amount of synergy through the mutuality of focus derived from the shared relevance of setting, identity, task, etc. (until and unless one of the communicators is jolted by contradictions).

ONE——→X

.

.

.

P→TWO " I need not spell it out. "

Q←TWO " You know what I mean. "

· " He didn't say in so many words what

· he meant. "

.

ONE←—Y

Informal restricted codes exchanged in interpersonal encounters are often characterized by such adhoc improvisation through implicative images, discussed above as the reflected function of a message. In this context, the associative images of X and Y carried by communicator ONE synchronize in essence with the images P and Q carried by communicator TWO. This phenomenon of interaction can be characterized as "communicative sensitivity ", distinct from " proficienty " in language skills. This characteristic allows a communicator to transform many diverse and adhoc fluid

cues inspeech to a degree of communicability for a particular purpose.

This communicative sensitivity features prominently in affective communication, developed through the relationship between two communicators in a dyad, between two groups (marked by sex, age, nationality, religion, ideology or other cultural traits), or by the imperatives of setting, transmission channel, etc.

Communication Ethos

Communication lies at the heart of all human relations. Often, different roles in a setting, or different identities, or cultural legacies transmit some prominent values of interaction from one generation to another—a way of interpreting and sharing common experiences known as communication *ethos*.

One observes markedly different persuasive techniques in the conduct of election campaigns—delivering speeches, conducting debates, organizing publicity, etc.—in such different countries as India, Britian, and the United States. Reluctance to adopt the the family planning and agricultural promotion campaigns carried by radio and television in Oriental societies could be attributed to the importation of Occidental techniques of persuasion, which do not out much ice with the Oriental masses.

In this context, we need to examine the values of communication that prevail in plurilingual societies and relate the characteristics of communication ethos on the cline of local, regional, national and global interactions. Communication ethos is primarily concerned with communicative *roles* in a dyad, rather than with the rights of an individual. Hence, an adequate response to the formulation of the "right to communicate" as a system of universal ethics for communication will depend largely on its capacity to *integrate* with the local and regional communication ethos. The question that needs to be projected is how to intergrate the existing " organic " communication ethos with the pressures of massive technology of communication on a global scale.

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