

## **The Communication Process**

Communication is the process of creating or sharing meaning in informal conversation, group interaction, or public speaking. To understand how this process works, we begin by describing its essential elements: participants (who), messages (what), context (where), channels (how), interference (distractions), and feedback (reaction).

### **Participants**

The participants are the individuals who assume the roles of senders and receivers during an interaction. As senders, participants form and transmit messages using verbal symbols, visual images, and nonverbal behavior. As receivers, they interpret the messages that have been transmitted to them.

### **Messages**

Messages are the verbal utterances, visual images, and nonverbal behaviors to which meaning is attributed during communication. To understand how messages are created and received, we need to understand meanings, symbols, encoding and decoding, and form (organization).

### **Meanings**

Meanings include the thoughts in your mind as well as the interpretations you make of another's message. Meanings are the ways participants make sense of messages. It is important to realize that meanings are not transferred from one person to another, but are created together in an exchange. Some communication settings enable participants to verify that they have shared meanings; in other settings this is more difficult. For instance, if Sarah says to Tiffany that many female celebrities are unhealthily underweight, through the exchange of verbal messages, they can together come to some degree of understanding of what that means. But if Sarah is giving a speech on the subject to an audience of 200 people, Tiffany's ability to question Sarah and negotiate a mutual meaning is limited. If Sarah shows a slideshow of before-and-after photographs of some of the celebrities she is referring to, she can make the meaning clear even for a large audience.

### **Symbols**

To express yourself, you form messages made of verbal symbols (words), nonverbal cues (behaviors), and visual images. Symbols are words, sounds, and actions that represent specific ideas and feelings. As you speak, you choose word symbols to express your meaning. At the same time, you also use facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice—all symbolic, nonverbal cues—in an attempt to express your meaning. Your listeners make interpretations or attribute meaning to the messages they receive. When you offer your messages through a variety of symbols, the meaning you are trying to convey becomes clearer.

## **Encoding and decoding**

Encoding is the process of putting your thoughts and feelings into words, nonverbal cues, and images. Decoding is the process of interpreting another's message. Ordinarily you do not consciously think about either the encoding or the decoding process. Only when there is a difficulty, such as speaking in a second language or having to use an easier vocabulary with children, do you become aware of encoding. You may not think about decoding until someone seems to speak in circles or uses unfamiliar technical words and you have difficulty interpreting or understanding what is being said. Have you ever taken a course where the instructor used lots of unfamiliar technical words? If so, how did that affect the decoding process for you?

## **Form (Organization)**

When the meaning we wish to share is complex, we may need to organize it in sections or in a certain order. Message form is especially important when one person talks without interruption for a relatively long time, such as in a public speech or when reporting an event to a colleague at work. Visual images also need to be organized and in good form if they are to aid understanding.

## **Context**

The context is composed of the (1) physical, (2) social, (3) historical, (4) psychological, and (5) cultural situations in which a communication encounter occurs, including what precedes and follows what is said. According to noted German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the ideal speech situation is impossible to achieve, but considering its contexts as we communicate with others can move us closer to that goal (Littlejohn & Foss, 2007 p. 335). The context affects the expectations of the participants, the meaning these participants derive, and their subsequent behavior.

### **Physical context**

The physical context includes the location, the environmental conditions (temperature, lighting, and noise level), the distance between communicators, and the time of day. Each of these factors can affect the communication. For instance, the meaning shared in a conversation may be affected by whether it is held in a crowded company cafeteria, an elegant candlelit restaurant, over the telephone, or on the Internet.

Today, more and more of our communication exchanges occur in technologically mediated spaces. When you call someone on your cell phone, for instance, you are in different physical places and your conversation will be influenced by the physical contexts each of you occupy as well as by the quality of your phone connection.

Moreover, the messages and meaning are affected by whether the technology used is synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous technologies allow us to exchange messages in real time, while asynchronous technologies allow delays between sending, receiving, and responding to messages. Telephone calls are synchronous, and voice mail messages and e-mail are typically asynchronous. Instant messages (IMs) and text messages may be either synchronous or asynchronous.

## **Social context**

The social context is the nature of the relationship between the participants. Whether communication takes place among family members, friends, acquaintances, work associates, or strangers influences what and how messages are formed, shared, and interpreted. For instance, most people change how they interact when talking with their parents or siblings as compared to how they interact when talking with their friends.

## **Historical context**

The historical context is the background provided by previous communication episodes between the participants. It influences understandings in the current encounter. For instance, suppose one morning Chad tells Shelby that he will pick up the rough draft of a paper they had given to their professor for feedback to help prepare the final manuscript. When Shelby joins Chad for lunch in the cafeteria, she says, “Did you get it?” Another person listening to the conversation would have no idea what it is. Yet Chad quickly replies, “It’s on my desk.” Shelby and Chad would understand each other because the content of their previous conversation provides the context for understanding what “it” is in this exchange.

## **Psychological context**

The psychological context includes the moods and feelings each person brings to the interpersonal encounter. For instance, suppose Corinne is under a lot of stress. While she is studying for an exam, a friend stops by and pleads with her to take a break and go to the gym with her. Corinne, who is normally good-natured, may explode with an angry tirade. Why? Because her stress level provides the psychological context within which she hears this message and it affects how she responds.

## **Cultural context**

The cultural context includes the values, beliefs, orientations, underlying assumptions, and rituals prevalent among people in a society (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007). Culture penetrates into every aspect of our lives, affecting how we think, talk, and behave. Each of us belongs to many cultural groups, though we may differ in how much we identify with each group. Mina, for example, was born in Taiwan but was raised in Boston, where she attended Chinese elementary school. She is also a college student and a Democrat. Each of these groups helps characterize her cultural setting. When two people from different cultures interact, misunderstandings may occur because of the cultural variations between them. For example, the role of a “good student” in many Asian cultures typically means being quiet, respectful, and never challenging others’ views, but the good-student role in U.S. classrooms often includes being talkative, assertive, and debating the views expressed by others.

## **Channels**

Channels are both the route traveled by the message and the means of transportation. Messages are transmitted through sensory channels. Face-to-face communication has three basic channels: verbal symbols, nonverbal cues, and visual images. Technologically mediated communication uses these same channels, though nonverbal cues such as movements, touch, and gestures are represented by visual symbols like emoticons (textual images that symbolize the sender's mood, emotion, or facial expressions) and acronyms (abbreviations that stand in for common phrases). For example, in a face-to-face interaction, Barry might express his frustration about a poor grade on an assignment by verbally noting why he thought the grade was unfair, by visually showing the assignment along with the grading criteria for it, and by nonverbally raising his voice and shaking his fist. In an online interaction, he might insert a frowning-face emoticon (/) or the acronym "POed" to represent those nonverbal behaviors.

## **Interference (Noise)**

Interference (noise) is any stimulus that hinders the process of sharing meaning. Interference can be physical or psychological. Physical interference includes the sights, sounds, and other stimuli in the environment that draw people's attention away from intended meaning. For instance, while a friend is giving you instructions on how to work the new MP3 player, your attention may be drawn away by the external noise of your favorite TV show, which is on in the next room. External noise does not have to be a sound, however. Perhaps, while your friend is giving instructions, your attention is drawn momentarily to an attractive man or woman. Such visual distractions are also physical interference.

Psychological interference includes internal distractions based on thoughts or feelings and can fall into two categories: internal noise and semantic noise. Internal noise refers to the thoughts and feelings that compete for attention and interfere with the communication process. If you have ever tuned out the lecture your professor is giving and tuned into a daydream or a past conversation, then you have experienced internal noise.

Semantic noise refers to the distractions aroused by certain symbols that take our attention away from the main message. If a friend describes a 40-year-old secretary as "the girl in the office," and you think girl is an odd and condescending term for a 40-year-old woman, you might not even hear the rest of what your friend has to say. Whenever we react emotionally to a word or a behavior, we are experiencing semantic noise.

## **Feedback**

Feedback is the reactions and responses to a message that indicate to the sender whether and how that message was heard, seen, and interpreted. In face-to-face communication, we can express feedback verbally through words or nonverbally through body language. In online interactions, we can express feedback verbally through words or nonverbally through emoticons and acronyms. We continuously give feedback when we are listening to another, if only by paying attention, giving a confused look, or showing signs of boredom. Or we may give direct verbal

feedback by saying, “I don’t understand the point you are making” or “That’s a great comment you just made.”