N. Di Blas (2010) – Notes on Relevance, Informativeness, Common Ground

Quality in a communication scenario

The basic elements of a communication scenario are: someone (1), the sender, saying something (2), the message, to someone else (3), the addressee. This situation, in which someone says something to someone else, always takes place in order to fulfill some goal: to inform, to ask, to persuade, to teach, to entertain, to be "in touch", etc.

> **Example 1**: An English teacher introduces his/her students to the works of Shakespeare
> (Goal: to teach; specifically: to teach Shakespeare).
>
> **Example 2**: the University of Lugano wants to recruit new students, therefore it tries to persuade its alumni to spread the word.
> (Goal: to persuade; specifically: to persuade someone to spread the news).

When communication is planned, the first step is to clearly identify the goals; the next is to find the best strategies in order to reach them. A very useful way to do this is to identify the so-called "key values", that express the communication requirements. Let's consider example 2: once it is settled that we want to use *alumni* for recruitment, then we have to decide how to make them stay in touch with the university; the possibilities are: (1) promote identification between the alumni and the university (ex. "You are still one of us"); (2) convey the idea that the university is a dynamic entity which it is very interesting to keep in touch with and/or (3) an open request of collaboration, based on the students' "indebtedness" to the institution that educated them.
The identification of the goals and, subsequently of the requirements (expressed by means of key values), are fundamental steps when *building* communication and, conversely, are wonderful guidelines for judging an already made communication artifact.
We must now introduce a fundamental concept in communication sciences, that of relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1995[2]).

Relevance

Every "text" (in a broad sense: every act of communication) takes place in order to answer to a question (be it explicit or not). The appropriateness of the text in respect to the question from which it stems is called relevance. The most relevant text is the one that answers its question best (i.e. in a deep, effective way).

> **Example:** Luis and Mary go hiking in the mountains (please note that Luis is secretly in love with Mary). After a while, Mary gets tired: she's not fit, it is very hot and her backpack is definitely too heavy (her mother has filled it with jumpers and food to the brim). She feebly asks: "How long still?" Luis has a wide range of possibilities, from "It's another 4 and a half hours, judging from your average speed and the fact that there are still 2, 3 miles to go" (perfectly correct though merciless) to "We are almost there" (very comforting but don't get cheated – it's a lie; by the way: this is the answer you would get when hiking in the Italian Alps, trust me) and "Why don't we just stop a while?" (please note that this is not, technically speaking, an answer to the question – it says nothing about how much they should walk still; a machine would never answer like that, but we humans are specialized in making inferences and similar things, thanks God).
> Who can guess the most appropriate (i.e. the most relevant) answer in this situation[1]?

[1] Solution: it is answer 3. By the way, Luis and Mary got engaged straight away.

Relevance is a fundamental criterion of quality for communication. A text that does not answer the question for which it was created (a non-relevant, or "irrelevant", text) is definitely not a qualitative text, rich and interesting in information though it may be.
When it comes to multimedia communication, relevance is related not only to the verbal aspects of communication, but also to the multimedia ones.

> **Example**. The University of Lugano wants to convey the message that it is a dynamic place. An image in which the campus without students is shown would not be appropriate for this message, while image 1 (the new version of the website), in which groups of students are shown, is definitely much more appropriate.

Fig. 1. Example of relevant visual communication (USI website, 2010). The image wants to convey the key value: "the university is a dynamic place with many students".

As this example clearly shows, relevance is strictly related to the choice of the contents, to what is "said"/conveyed (through texts, images, all the possible available means) and what is not said.

Choice of contents
Every element introduced in an act of communication must be re-traceable up to communication requirements. All the elements for which this relation cannot be traced (piece of content → corresponding requirement), are not relevant.

> **Example 1**. During oral exams, the typical strategy of those who are not able to answer appropriately (i.e. in a relevant manner) is to say something anyway, something somehow related to the question's broad topic. In this case, we have a non-relevant communication (the question is not being answered), in spite of the fact that true ideas are being exposed.

> **Example 2**. The Uffizi website, in the pages dedicated to its collections, offers a list of the exhibited works of art as they are organized room by room. There we find a piece of information that is certainly not relevant to most of its virtual visitors: the link "+", which apparently promises additional information, something like a description of the work of art, an image or similar, presents the inventory number of the work of art. This piece of information may be of interest to a very restricted audience (like museum professionals) (fig. 2).

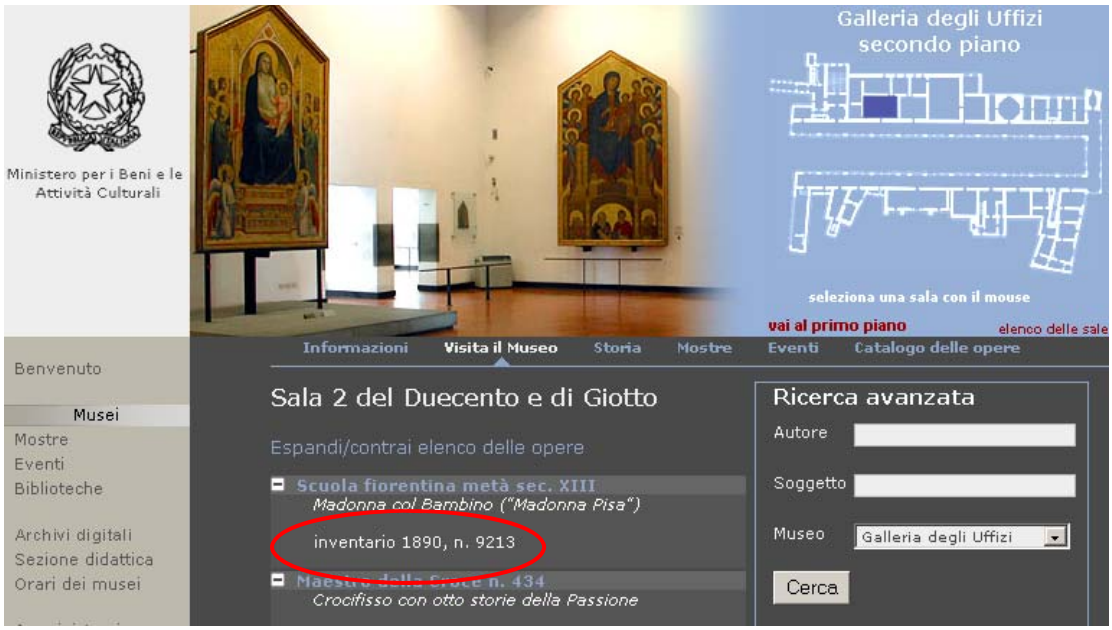

Fig. 2. Example of non-relevant information. The inventory number of each work of art in the Uffizi website is certainly not of interest for most of its virtual visitors (2010 version of the website).

Informative-ness

The concept of informative-ness is strictly related to relevance. A text must inform, or put forth something new. By "informative-ness", we mean the extent to which a text puts forth pieces of content that are new or unexpected for the addressee (De Beaugrande & Dressler 1994). That is why informative-ness is related to relevance: a text that does not put forth anything new is meaningless and cannot be of interest to anyone by definition. Informative-ness is thus a pre-requisiteness of relevance.

> **Example**. A sentence like "Mary has got two eyes" does not make any sense, unless we take into consideration very peculiar contexts (like the "Star Wars" bar where beings can have a varying number of eyes…) or a particular intonation (that may convey the meaning that "Mary has got two beautiful eyes").

Reference

In order for communication to be qualitative, relevance is not sufficient. It also needs to be understandable, so that the addressee can really grasp the message. the fundamental pre-requisite for communication to be understandable is that the so-called common ground between the interlocutors exists and is taken into adequate consideration: a well-defined set of shared knowledge (Clark 1996).

> "…Roughly speaking, the presuppositions of a speaker are the propositions whose truth he takes fro granted as part of the background of the conversation… presuppositions are what is taken by the speaker to be the common ground of the participants in the conversation, what is treated as their common knowledge" (Clark 1996)

There are two possible mistakes related to common ground:

1) Taking pieces of knowledge, beliefs and/or information that are *not* shared for granted (the most common mistake)

2) Not taking for granted pieces of knowledge, beliefs and/or information that *are* shared. This kind of mistake, less common, originates verbose communications in which things are clarified that should not be. It is a very peculiar kind of non-informative communication.

Let's analyze the first kind of mistake.
First of all, the interlocutors (who want to communicate verbally) must share a language, a linguistic code. A less obvious pre-requisite is that they must share – if needed – a technical language (a so-called LSP, "Language for Specific Purpose"). In other words, the use of technical jargon must be thought about carefully, in light of whom the addressee(s) is/are, what knowledge they have, etc. When talking to non-technical people, the use of technical jargon will make the communication quite difficult. Let's look at an example.

Example. "Universal Mobile Telecommunications System (UMTS) is one of the third-generation (3G) cell phone technologies, which is also being developed into a 4G technology. Currently, the most common form of UMTS uses W-CDMA as the underlying air interface. It is standardized by the 3GPP, and is the European answer to the ITU IMT-2000 requirements for 3G cellular radio systems.
To differentiate UMTS from competing network technologies, UMTS is sometimes marketed as 3GSM, emphasizing the combination of the 3G nature of the technology and the GSM standard which it was designed to succeed." (wikipedia definition of UMTS – accessed May 2008).

The use of acronyms is even more specialized and, therefore, "dangerous", as shown in figures 3 and 4. In figure 3, the previous version of the "La Triennale" (a museum based in Milan) website is shown, in which one of the links is named "RaPU" (Rete Archivi Piani Urbanistici – Network of Archives of Urban Plans); in the next version (fig. 4), there is a small improvement (Progetto RapU – Project RaPU), but it is still unclear for the vast majority of the virtual visitors.

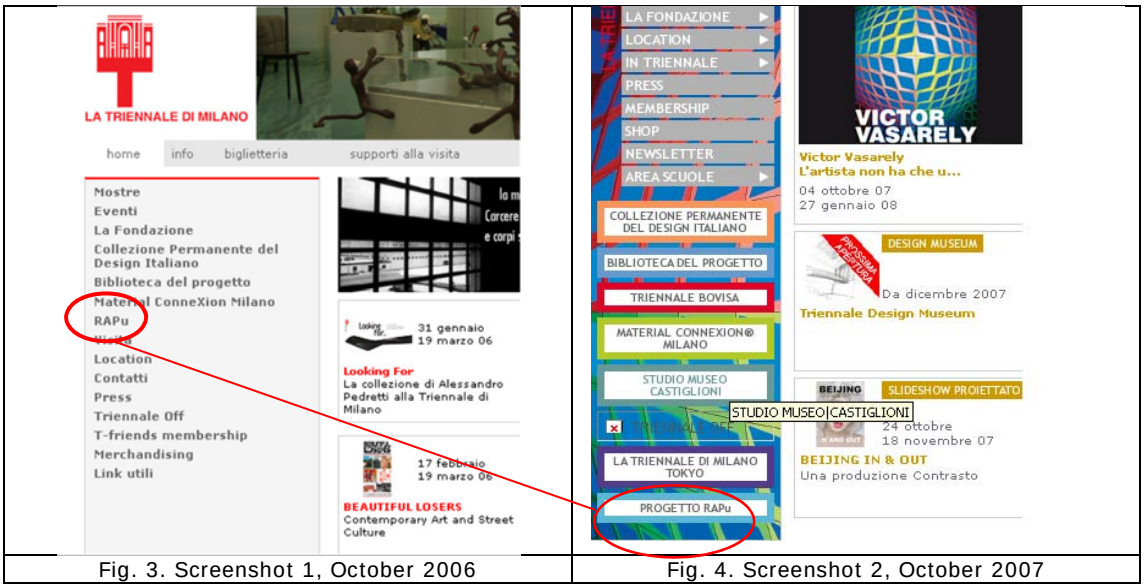

Fig. 3. Screenshot 1, October 2006 | Fig. 4. Screenshot 2, October 2007

Figure 3 e 4: the Triennale di Milano website: the use of acronyms (RaPU: Rete Archivi Piani Urbanistici – Network of Archives of Urban Plans) is quite difficult to decode.

It is very easy to make mistakes using the wrong "language", not only in the case of technical jargon (if it is very well known to us), but also in the case of what we may call "internal" jargon, with respect to a group (a laboratory, an institution, etc.).

> **Example**. On the Louvre's homepage, there is the link "Auditorium". The link leads to a list of activities (like concerts and lectures) held in the auditorium wing of the museum. This link is not easy to decipher for virtual visitors who have never been to the real museum. This link actually mirrors the internal organization of the museum.

Fig. 5: Louvre website's Homepage; the link "Auditorium" mirrors the internal organization of the (real) museum.

References

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