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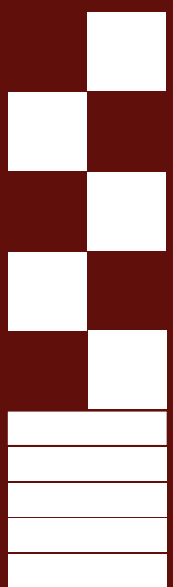
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman



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COMMUNICATION CONDUCT IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Division of the Social Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology

By

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Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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In common sense usage, the term "communication" seems to be used chiefly to refer to the transmission of information by means of configurations of language signs, either spoken or written. This kind of sign behavior has certain general characteristics:

1. The vocabulary of terms employed can be defined or specified with tolerable clarity and interpersonal agreement, and is relatively independent of the context or medium in which it occurs. Hence, messages framed in one language can be translated without great loss into other language systems.
2. Messages that are put together by means of language signs can be discursive, involving a long sequence of interdependent links of meaning. These messages can also be abstract in character.
3. The language or linguistic component of a message is not merely consensually understood but the meaning is, in some sense, officially accredited. The sender may be made explicitly responsible for having sent it and the recipient may be made officially responsible for receiving and understanding it. Given the social situation in which the message occurs, its linguistic meaning is the formally sanctioned one.
4. Linguistic behavior is thought (by the everyday user) to be merely and admittedly a means employed in order to convey information. There is an obligation to value and judge the message on no other basis. It is felt that a linguistic message is conveyed intentionally for the purpose of conveying the meaning of it. Speech or writing is a goal-directed act, and communication is the goal. It is a voluntary act, in the sense that the interpretation the recipient ought to make is foreseeable by the sender before he sends his message, at a time when it is possible for him to modify his message and within his capacity to do so.
5. A linguistic message—more technically, the semantic component of a message—has an explicitly stated object of reference or direction of intent. As a recent student of conversational interaction has suggested:

   "The direction of intent is operationally defined as the object toward which the remark is made. Remarks may be directed toward the self, toward the group relationships, toward the issue being

> discussed and toward aspects not involved in the immediate grouping."[1]
>
> The "meaning" of a message resides, then, in what is said about its object of reference. Meaning is thus officially independent of the actor who sends the message and of the conditions under which the message is sent.[2]

No doubt the most important kinds of linguistic behavior consist of spoken and written communication. There are, of course, clear cut examples of linguistic behavior which involve performances of other kinds. The Morse code and the semaphore system provide cases in point. These are, as Sapir suggested, language transfers, and anything that can officially be expressed by means of spoken words can be conveyed by them.

In addition, there are cases where formal and official language-like status is given to certain behaviors of a gestural kind but where a limitation exists as to the size of the vocabulary and as to the number of different statements that can be made in the language. In considering this kind of behavior, Sapir says:

> In the more special class of communicative symbolism one cannot make a word-to-word-translation, as it were, back to speech but can only paraphrase in speech the intent of the communication. Here belong such symbolic systems as wig-wagging, the use of railroad lights, bugle calls in the army, and smoke signals.[3]

Sapir also suggests that this kind of language behavior usually subserves a technical process where spoken and written language is impractical because of transmission conditions or because there is a desire to rigidly limit the possible response to the message. In Dixon, for example, a shepherd rounding up sheep can manage his dog by means of about six gestures that are significant to his dog and for which the dog, in a sense, is held officially responsible. There is a signal to make the dog stop in his tracks, to make him lie down, to make him come back to the shepherd, to make him cannily come up behind a sheep, to make him cut far in back of a stray so as to round it up. Perhaps there is also a type of signal employed to make the dog vary the rate at which these commands are obeyed, but this tends to be a less official part of the vocabulary and is played down in the competitions called dog trials that are formally designed to test the discipline and linguistic capacity of dogs. Another technical language can be found in use in Dixon on Friday nights by the eight or ten men regularly employed to unload the steamboat. Due to noise level and the restriction of angle of vision caused by equipment, a small vocabulary of terms consisting of full arm gestures is employed to instruct the hoist engineer as to rate of movement of the hoist rope, as to lateral and vertical movements, and as to stopping and starting.

[1] B. Steinzer, "The Development and Evaluation of a Measure of Social Interaction," *Human Relations*, II, 103–121 and 319–347. Steinzer attempts to work out a set of general intent categories for the content analysis of conversation.

[2] Recipients almost always qualify the information in a message by observations concerning the state of the sender, his calmness, nervousness, seriousness, social qualifications, and the like. Strictly speaking, these qualifying sources of information pertain to the response of the recipient, not to the content of the message. Qualifying information does not officially provide us with biographical material concerning the sender, as do his statements about himself. The signs which convey qualifying information are not linguistic signs and do not have an object of reference; they are natural signs or expressions and are an intrinsic part of the very thing about which they convey information.

[3] Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), p. 107.

We must consider, finally, an even more simple kind of language behavior. There are certain gestures which are employed as an official part of linguistic communication but which can only be officially used to convey a single piece of information.[4] In Dixon, for example, pupils in the classroom gain permission to speak to the teacher by first holding up their right hand. Pupils are taught that holding up one's hand is the formally correct and recognized way of obtaining the attention of the teacher. Similarly, when one student has the eraser that has been assigned to his block of seats, other pupils in this block can request the eraser by tapping the student who has it on the shoulder. Tapping for this purpose has been explicitly and officially assigned a meaning, although, of course, the teacher has difficulty in preventing students from loading the sign with meanings of an unformalized kind. Throughout our society, beckoning gestures signifying "come here," and shrugging of shoulders signifying "I do not know" tend also to be messages whose meaning is clearly understood and to a degree formally accredited.[5]

[4] Many examples of conventionalized gestures of this kind are considered in Levette J. Davidson, "Some Current Folk Gestures and Sign Languages," *American Speech*, XXV, 3–9.

The general characteristics of linguistic behavior have been mentioned, and four types of this kind of behavior have been described: language proper; language transfers; technical symbol systems; and official signals. These types of linguistic behavior vary in complexity and formality, but all share the essential characteristic of linguistic behavior: they carry a message for which the sender can be made responsible, and they are properly usable in an admittedly intentional way for purposes of communication.

[5] The art of miming provides a very exceptional case of employing sequences of understandable gestures in order to convey information of the same complexity as can be conveyed by the spoken word. Certain types of deaf and dumb language which do not employ language transfer provide another example. These symbol systems are not an adaptation to special technical conditions of communication, as in the case of train signals, but rather an adaptation to lack of usual communication capacities on the part of communicators.

When we examine linguistic behavior, a clear difference can be found between the object *at which* the message is *directed* and the object *to which* the message *refers*. When an individual says something about a person he is talking to, these two objects coincide, but this fact should not lead us to confuse the role of recipient with the object of reference.

In analyzing linguistic behavior, it is convenient to distinguish types of recipient. A linguistic message may be directed at one or more specific persons who are immediately present to the sender. This immediate linguistic communication is sometimes called face-to-face interaction or conversational interaction. It is, perhaps, the classic or type-case of linguistic communication, other kinds being modifications of it. Linguistic communication may, of course, occur between specific persons who are not immediately present to one another, as in the case of telephone conversations and exchanges of letters. These mediated kinds of communication contact vary, of course, in the degree to which they restrict or attenuate the flow of information and the rapidity of interchange. In the literature, this has been called point-to-point communication. Linguistic communi-

cation may also occur between a source of sign impulse and all the persons who happen to come within range of it. This has been called mass-impression in the literature. We are accustomed to consider this weakened kind of linguistic communication in reference to advertising and the mass media, radio, press, etc., but it also plays an important role in rural communities. In Dixon, for example, two of the three shops and the post office have bulletin boards on which notices of all kinds are posted. These notices are usually of the "open" or "to whom it may concern" kind. Anyone seeing a notice is automatically considered to be an appropriate recipient for it. Invitations to community socials, to auctions, to funerals, etc., are posted in this way.[6] Correspondingly, the kinds of "social occasions" that are organized by means of conversational or point-to-point communication of invitations are not stressed, although they are becoming more common. In previous periods in the social history of Dixon, invitations to weddings were also posted in an open way, a practice which is still observed in a few small Bergand communities. Mass impression is often a weakened form of linguistic communication because recipients are usually not obliged to accept responsibility for having received the message, although this is not always the case.[7] Orders posted on a barracks bulletin board usually render all persons in the barracks legally accountable for having read the message. Government proclamations in official newspapers or even on the radio can also carry this kind of responsibility. Posting of banns is another case in point.[8]

[6] In European cities that have a *quartier* type of social organization, the death of a resident is sometimes advertised by means of a card placed in a shop window or on the door of a house, the card inviting all those who wish to attend the funeral.

[7] Recently we have been witnessing a series of conflicts concerning the use of certain bounded spaces for this kind of communication. Legal questions have arise as to whether advertisers have the right to make use of the sky above a city for skywriting, the sidewalks in front of stores for loudspeaker blasts, and bus and rail coaches for piped advertising. This is referred to as the problem of the "captive audience."

[8] Ruesch and Bateson (*op. cit.*, p. 39) have suggested "many-to-one" as another type of linguistic communication. In such cases, a large number of different persons are able to convey, in a relatively anonymous way, particular messages to a single recipient. Instead of a mass-impression this is, in a sense, mass-impressing communication. Another marginal type of linguistic communication occurs when one sender directs a message to a specific recipient in such a way that many other persons can equally well receive the message. This occurs in the case of personal message boards, as found in some European cities, and when a child comes to the window of a house and yells for his companion to come out. Perhaps these kinds of communication arrangements can best be considered in another context, in an analysis of sender and recipient responsibility.