

# CHAPTER

# 1

## **The Contextual Framework for a Social Psychology of Language in Communication: Aims and Issues**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Asleep we escape the pleasures and pains of interacting with other people. Waking, we face another day, and this brings with it the necessity of coordinating our behavior with that of other people. Unless we are hermits or members of societies where maximal silence is held to be a virtue, this coordination will require that we communicate with other human beings. Language may well invade our activities before breakfast, and we may not be able to guarantee safety from speech again until the last goodnight has been said. We can telephone around the globe from almost anywhere to almost anywhere. If we are to participate in our societies we need to be able to read and write. We can fax and e-mail, again on an international scale, if we so choose. And in the next few years we can look forward to visual as well as auditory internet connections, supplemented with conversions between speech and writing and simultaneous translations into a variety of languages. We converse. We know roughly how to interpret what others say, write, and do, more or less. We know how to speak and act, and they manage likewise. But what do we know? And how do we manage?

To answer these questions, persons with scientific pretensions will want to analyze what goes on in communication. They will find out what is already believed or known. They will observe what happens. They will try to construct descriptions and explanations of plausible kinds. They will take everyday activities apart, separating out the bits and pieces and exploring the relationships between them. They will look for regularities and patterns, all the time trying to make sense of what they observe and endeavoring to express this sense symbolically in terms that others can understand. They will try to classify. It is a hazardous business.

## 1.2 The Nature of Verbal Communication

It is good to be able to record that studies of non-verbal communication in human beings and other creatures have flourished impressively over the last half century without the emergence of fundamental methodological and philosophical conflicts (Cappella & Palmer, 1990; Patterson, 2001; chapters 4 and 5). In contrast, the study of verbal communication has been and is suffering from pronounced disagreements, some of which can be viewed as unproductive and destructive. Others are simply irritating issues that are commonly present in young fields where key concepts still lack accepted definitions. Since much of the rest of the book reviews the substantial progress made in the theoretical and empirical study of topics at the intersect of language and social psychology, it is perhaps most useful to focus early on some of the issues of conflict in the frames of reference within which the study of language and social psychology is taking place, and to seek reconciliation among those in which the oppositions posed are unnecessary, false, or are in fact productive tensions within language and its usage. This will mean attending to some of the most elementary and fundamental issues, such as the very conceptualization of verbal communication, the nature and use of language, and the methodological issues associated with questions about the kinds of evidence which are to count as a basis for holding well-founded beliefs and within which kind of epistemological framework these are to be generated and evaluated (see chapters 11 and 15).

Successful communication between human beings incorporates encoding, production, transmission, reception and decoding within already shared frames of reference; for example, what is novel can be assimilated or accommodated to only when it becomes linked to what is already shared contextually. This apparently innocuous claim can of course be shown to cover many contestable issues. It is inherent in the nature of communication with speech or writing that its delivery and reception is sequential; it is impossible to say at once all that is intended. Hence, as already mentioned, it will be important for readers to avoid premature categorization of the writer of this text with any particular stereotype. To proceed, we shall need to analyze the components of communication and the relationships between them, and at this point I am caught on the horns of a dilemma. The strongest binary contrast in approaches to human communication is between starting with such technical problems as transmitting signals along a telegraph wire and gaining a purchase on the semi-otic systems of whole cultures. Let me hasten to say that both of these will

be addressed. However, I have found that while introductory semiotics is more commonly perceived as being full of exciting questions and insights, the advantages of these surprises are prone to dissipate as students become overwhelmed by the divergent possibilities of interesting questions. Once switched into the game, observant eyes, ears, noses, tongues or skins connected to active brains can proliferate an infinity of pertinent but uncoordinated questions. It becomes feasible and scientifically defensible to write a research monograph on the meanings and significance of the discernible details and their relationships of just one page of a newspaper, one TV news broadcast, one choir singing, five minutes of a psychiatric interview, a handshake, an almost anything. Generating questions to pose is easy; answering many of them and evaluating the value of the answers can be the work of more than a lifetime. How do we select what is worth doing from the array? How do we save our brains from being overwhelmed by what we find out? And how do we prevent our ideas from soaring into wild interpretations and implausible world-views?

The first question is unanswerable. One answer to the second is to start with the smaller and simpler. One answer to the third is to demand at least some empirical evidence to support claims made. Of course, we then have to agree on what will constitute adequate evidence, and we need to require that empirical evidence and descriptive/interpretive accounts of phenomena act as reciprocating constraints on each other. Data need to be evidence relevant to some issue. Ideas need to be anchored in plausible constructions of experience.

By such a route I am retreating to a justification for introducing communication as coded signals travelling as impulses along wires or through the atmosphere, before facing up to the cornucopia of semiotics. The initial model to be presented is skeletal and incomplete, emphasizing as it does a single message travelling in one direction only and focusing on the message rather than its origin and fate. This model can be and was expanded in due course to cope with multiple sequential exchanges occurring between real people through real time in real contexts.

Meanwhile, to begin at a beginning. Shannon and Weaver (1949) developed a model of information transmission that has become known as the *Conduit Theory of Communication*. It was not and is not a theory. It simply lists some of the components to be considered in any single communicative act. Referring to it as a conduit was intended to give the idea of a wire down which signals travel, relaying a message that emerges at the other end. Shannon and Weaver were primarily concerned with telecommunication and radio problems and the reduction in loss of information between source and destination. The model also presupposes that the en-

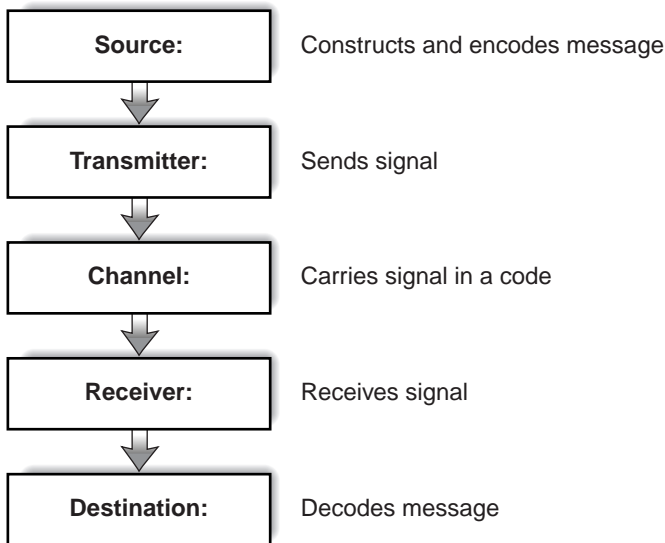


Figure 1.1 Shannon and Weaver's Model for Communication.

coder is intending to reduce uncertainty with the transmission, and knows how to reduce uncertainty, neither of which is necessarily the case in human communication. Here, the object is to introduce the basic model rather than report and evaluate its measures of success and its limitations across the whole range of its applications. One of the key concepts, *noise*, will not figure in this account, which is confined to the other five: *source*, *transmitter*, *channel*, *receiver*, and *destination*, along with the concepts of *signal*, *messages*, *medium* and *code*.

There is nothing contentious in selecting the nine features as components to be considered. If we wish, we can pursue any one of them into levels of greater complexity or specificity. We can apply the model from problems of the warning colors of wasps (black and yellow) through to human beings using private *ciphers* to mean the opposite of what they say. Before we ask more detailed questions about the code itself, we can ask the dangerously idealistic question about the true (real) meaning of any message. This has proved to be one of the great stumbling block to progress, and is one example of a false presupposition leading to a false opposition about the nature of both language and communication. Each candidate advanced as having the right to define the "real meaning" of a message can be shown to be unsatisfactory. If we claim that the *speaker's intentions* have the strongest claim, we may observe that the message itself may not

be a culturally correct realization of the intentions, either in construction or delivery – or both. Wrong units (for example words) may be selected, either out of ignorance or anxiety. What is intended as a compliment may be delivered insultingly. How can we be sure of what the speaker’s intentions were? We cannot be.

If we exclude intention, and suggest that the meanings of messages can be defined objectively, then it should be the case that there will be a cultural consensus as to the “real meanings” among proficient users of the language. Disagreements should not arise. If they do, one line of argument would be to invoke the defensible hypothesis of sub-cultural differences in meanings of the same patterns. But fruitful as such a defence can be initially, it will ultimately fail. The “real meaning” can only be in the text if the contextual presuppositions are shared fully. This entails of course that the meaning is *not* in the text, but in a cultural consensus. Involving abstractions such as the *generalized other* or the *typical member of the culture* will not salvage the situation, because their perceptions are necessarily not objective. The third possibility of defining the “real meaning” as the *interpretation of the reader* or hearer, shares comparable weaknesses to the other two possibilities. Interpreters have no special status as objective judges.

The rejection of all three of these possibilities might then be used to advance the idea that the true meanings are not the privilege of any one party, but are simply a matter of *negotiation* among the participants. If that is so, there is no true meaning. However this position of meaning as being negotiated has also been pushed to a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that the transmission model of communication should be abandoned in favor of fuzzy flexible perspectives, that will permit creative constructions by individuals who will be freed from the constraints heretofore imposed upon them. It could be argued that this position is self-destructive as well as self-contradictory. Since generally the use of shared conventions is the essence of the systems, particular changes have to be negotiated and cannot be asserted and demanded by individuals; otherwise Humpty Dumpty ends up talking to himself alone, or worse.

Since human beings seem to manage to communicate with language more or less successfully much of the time, perhaps those asking about true meanings have posed inappropriate questions. *Information Theory* was intended to provide ways of analyzing reductions (and increases) in uncertainty in transmission and not its elimination in its generation. Communication can reduce uncertainty, but it cannot eliminate it. Such a position copes with what may be defended as the most rational construction of reality without giving rise to a claim that there is an objective reality that could be discovered. In cases where some party claims that

communication failure has occurred and where for some reason it is decided to allocate blame for the failure, there will be examples where it would be pragmatically silly not to blame one or other of the participants, but peculiar defences may well be made. In 1998 the President of the USA invoked a legal rather than a commonsense definition of “sexual relations” to justify the claim that he had not lied under oath: no communication failure and no lie. Later he changed his mind.

However, the focus on the transmission/reception components did lead to a relative neglect of the activities of the people, the encoder and decoder. The terms of *source*, *transmitter*, *receiver* and *destination* are still being attacked as implying passivity, an absence of agency, and a neglect of constructive/interpretive activities, even though it was as early as 1956 that Gerbner elaborated on and humanized these components. This should have precluded further adverse criticism of the model for being mechanical and passive.

In Gerbner’s model, a human source actively selects and interprets from the external (or internal) environment what is to be encoded into a message, and the receiver is similarly an active interpreter of messages. Source and receiver can be interactive, and clearly are if conversing, and hence meanings and significance can both be negotiated. With his own special interest in media, Gerbner himself was more concerned with what the controllers of media select for transmission and what is made available to an audience, but his flow-chart could represent a conversation equally well.

### 1.3 Semiotics

The conduit model is not alone in having been misrepresented by subsequent critics for failing to achieve what it was not intended to achieve; it was indeed limited by its point of departure, but not as much as some antagonists pretend. Semiotics is the science of signs in all their realizations and given this scope, it is not surprising that semiotic approaches too have been a victim of the orientations of their progenitors. Semiotics has been further handicapped by its multi-discipline origins and continuing variety of practitioners. Peirce, the philosopher (1931–1935/1955) introduced an analysis of a relational approach between the signifier and signified, as the basis of the signification linkage to “meaning”. The resultant triangle linked *sign*, *interpretant*, and *object* to each other. Part philosophical, part literary critical, Ogden and Richards (1923) introduced a somewhat different triangle in which *reference* as thought was linked to a

*referent* on the one hand and a *symbol* on the other, so that the symbol can *stand for* the reference. Both of these similar approaches were attempts to escape from the tangles and muddles that had engulfed philosophers such as Mill, Frege, Wittgenstein, and others who had difficulties in distinguishing between sense and reference (Mill, 1873), denotation and connotation (Frege, 1980), semantic and associative meaning, and the relationships between symbolic propositions and what they appear to be about (Wittgenstein, 1951; 1922/1961). The last continues to figure as a central concern (for example Davidson, 1984; 1986; Putnam, 1988; Rorty, 1991).

Independently, the linguist de Saussure (1925/59) had been developing his ideas on the distinctions between *langage*, *langue*, and *parole* (terms are defined in section 1.4), which also remain of crucial importance, but continue to be neglected by some monolingual English-speaking social scientists. Semioticians cite his observation that *signs* (symbols) gain their *significance* by virtue of contrasts with other signs in the *system*. In a sequence of signs, questions of both the sequence selected (*syntagmatic*) and the choices at each point in the sequence (*paradigmatic*) are important for meaning. (In non-linguistic systems more general questions of juxtaposition than sequence can arise, and in linguistic systems patterns of *collocation* [co-occurrence] are also important.)

From these three origins in particular, various systems for classifying signs have been developed, with comments being offered about the ways in which they function in a cultural context. Typically the materials used are referred to as *texts*, a term which can be extended to any cultural artefact(s). If, for example, a page of a newspaper is chosen, then a general question would ask which conventions of the culture are being used to convey what kinds of ideas. Questions can range from the size, shape and quality of the page, through the types of arrangement of language texts, photographs, and other graphics, to which items have been selected for reporting and how these have been framed. The Glasgow Media Group (1976) provide classic examples of such ideas in their analyses of news broadcasts. It is not surprising that those who control the media should encourage particular perspectives through what they present and the way they present issues. It is the task of semioticians to find out how particular *readings* (interpretations) are encouraged by the devices available, and it could be their task to find out which readings are in fact adopted by which readers. This is certainly an activity for social psychologists to engage in. The citing of a verbal/visual example of presuppositions here should not be seen as excluding other domains; the issues are omnipresent in our everyday experience. Analysis of oil paintings through time and across

cultures can be subjected to comparable treatment, as can clothes and ornaments worn, literature, or any other type of artefact.

Such activities have been very productive in generating ideas that have helped to raise explicit questions about matters previously treated as unproblematic or natural. They have been used to demonstrate how taken-for-granted “facts” should not be taken for granted. They have raised consciousness in particular about the moral qualities of our cultures and societies, including many of the false beliefs underpinning matters of procedural and distributive justice.

Unfortunately, the field has also generated its own difficulties. Where is the true meaning in an artefact or text? It is probably fair to say that opinions have been polarized between locating the true meaning as either in the text or in the *reader*, with the speaker or writer often conflated with the text. Either position can be criticized along identical lines to those used against the Conduit Model. We can never be sure what the intentions of the creator were. We can never be sure that the creator’s product instantiates the intention. Which readers are to be credited with the right to decide which reading is correct? If a particular reading is “preferred” by experts, this does not transcend its subjectivity.

If the advocates of the expert approaches were to be criticized for just one characteristic, it would have to be for their predispositions to assume that their ingenious personal explanations of the richness of texts bear any correspondence either to the intentions of the creators or more importantly perhaps, to the interpretations of or influences upon ordinary readers. Such stories are often advanced and disseminated without any checks on their empirical validity; if they are not so evaluated, then they remain as plausible hypotheses awaiting testing. Not all experts make such unsupported claims.

In contrast, if the advocates were to be commended for just one strength, it might be their emphasis on the *multiplicity of meanings* available in texts (discourse or whatever material is being examined). Eco (1979) introduced a distinction between *closed* and *open* texts. A closed text is one where the reader has in theory only one plausible interpretation, the author having structured the meanings to minimize possibilities of other readings. An open text is not one where interpretations are impossible, but one with multiple possibilities, and in the light of the information provided, offer a bundle of options. His illustrations are literary rather than conversational. In narrative stories about crime detection or espionage, for example, the author typically leads the reader along a single track using a variety of literary devices to puzzle, excite, frustrate and otherwise retain the reader’s attention on a predestined train of thought. This does not mean that



there are no ambiguities or vagueness. It does not mean that the narrative has to follow a linear sequence of real time. The primary focus is on the eventual discovery of who has been deceiving who about what – an exposure of the constructed reality.

This kind of story contrasts with those depicted in the film *Rashomon* or Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* novels; in each of these, the same events are played out from three different perspectives. As viewers or readers, we can appreciate this multiplicity of personal agendas. The use of repetition renders the multiplicity explicit. More commonly the uncertainties are left for individual characters (and readers) to interpret and act upon.

Insofar as many novels are narratives in which biographies of characters are woven together, they bear clear similarities to real life. Films and plays more so, since they add a visual channel. Soap operas go one step further in that their regular and long-term serialization add a continuity of years or even decades. The audiences they attract on a regular basis can extend to nearly half a country's population. Currently Britain has four indigenous TV soaps: two urban, with predominantly working class/lower middle class characters, one rural, and one suburban upwardly mobile. As Livingstone (1998) argues and demonstrates, these offer open texts whose characters have entered into the lives of their audiences as "real" people facing comparable difficulties and problems. The episodes provide ideas for ways of overcoming or resolving such difficulties, as well as setting up topics for conversation and characters for evaluation.

The study of ways in which these long-standing narratives mesh psychologically into the everyday lives of real people could help to re-anchor social psychology into the world it is expected to describe and explain. For the present, *narrative analysis* (see Sunwolf & Frey, 2001) in its various forms is not mainstream, but just as various forms of Conversational and Discourse Analysis have drawn attention to units and structures larger than that of the main clause and its coordinate and subordinate attachments, so narrative analysis may encourage an elaboration of those social-cognitive and attitudinal approaches which have adopted what is essentially a hypothetico-deductive model to single judgments in abstracted situations.

Whilst it is not strange that social psychologists would seek to generate theoretical models that can explain single judgments or actions in terms of general properties of the person in context, such judgments may be no more than task-specific reflective comments and in fact may bear little relation to the mechanisms that typically drive the scripts of the everyday talk and other actions of most people most of the time. Schank and Abelson (1977) are normally credited with the introduction of *Script Theory*, which

was an attempt to describe behavior sequences in semi-ritualized contexts. Scripts for speech and writing, for monologues, dialogues, and polylogues can also be devised and tested for their descriptive generality. Combinations of narrative analysis and script theory have more than begun to have their status as explanatory models of behavior recognized (Abelson & Lalljee, 1988; Antaki, 1988; Cody & McClaughlin, 1990).

How these various approaches to verbal communication will come to be collated remains to be seen. There are clear kernels of importance, relevance, and validity in each. Their diversity in part reflects the frightening breadth of topics embraced by the concept of verbal communication. Some of the possible claims or emphases have already been explored to some limiting *reductio ad absurdum*. Now their virtues need to be articulated.

## 1.4 Terms of Reference in the Study of Language in Communication

So far, a number of everyday words have been used in technical senses, and some novel words have also been introduced. At this stage it may be useful to specify how which words will be used in this text. Difficulties arise from several sources. One is that English may not make a binary contrast with two opposing words that cover the range, for example above/below. While these mark two opposite vertical directions relative to an object, there is no single term for either above nor below, and “not above” means either at the same height or below! Another is that English may not make the distinctions needed, neither in its everyday usage or in its specially developed technical vocabularies. A third is that different academic disciplines, or even different persons within the same discipline, may use the same term with different meanings or different terms with the same meaning.

Even “communication” itself is not without its difficulties. For a display or action to be communicative, does its originator have to *intend* to communicate? Here no such requirements will be made. Those who wish to render intention integral to communication have difficulties referring to animal displays and much human behavior.

French makes useful distinctions with *langage* as the superordinate term embracing both *langue* and *parole*, with *langue* being used to refer to the language system and *parole* to its use. English has three phrases for coping with the phenomena of *parole*: speech and writing, verbal behavior, and language use (or more rarely language behavior). Do each of these three include the vocalic/graphical? My guess is that while almost all linguists

would include vocalic/graphical features within linguistics, most social psychologists would treat them as components of non-verbal behavior, probably on the grounds that the meanings are not being carried by the phonemics, lexico-grammar, and semantics of the language system. Fortunately, these are issues of labelling at a super ordinate level only. The area of vocalic features with its three sub-areas is distinctive, and graphology has been a recognized legitimate area of study for years, even if to date the inferences drawn about character and personality on the basis of handwriting have not stood up to systematic empirical testing. Social psychologists have been disposed to link the vocalic with the non-verbal for two main reasons. One is that those interested in non-verbal communication (NVC) have invariably asked about NVC in animals, many of which have vocal but not verbal capacities, and one question typically posed here, and discussed in chapter 4, relates to how much can be communicated without involving language. The other reason is connected with the first in that the functions of the vocalic and the other non-verbals are prone to be treated as comparable to each other and contrastive with those of language.

One danger of separating the vocalic from the verbal, even for analytic purposes, will be apparent through most of this text. Transcriptions of speech are frequently reduced to be similar to this text, i.e. no vocalic indicators are recorded. If the Stanislavsky method school of acting required its students to be able to say "hello" in more than 50 ways, these presumably had over 50 distinguishable sub-purposes beyond the common one of greeting. As is illustrated in chapter 11, "the cat is on the mat" may be semantically equivalent regardless of which word is stressed, but where the stress falls is determined by which of six different questions it is an answer to.

Conversational and discourse analysts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Turnbull, 1992) have developed transcription rules that go beyond ordinary prose in certain respects, but these do not include all the variations in pitch, volume, duration, and timbre that an expert in prosodics might require, and they are both comparatively light on paralinguistic and extralinguistic information. In polite English society, no one would ask whether John tells lies, but if the question were posed, then the answer should be the equivalent of "Oh no," with the delay in the reply determining whether this actually meant "Yes."

Even with the selection of terms met so far, the issue of different terms with the same meaning, and the same terms with different meanings remains unresolved. Barthes (1968) uses *denotation* for the object referred to by a word and *connotation* for the individual person's total set of experien-

tial associations of the object. This contrasts with the consensus among philosophers who agree on denotation as reference, but treat connotation as comprising the criterial or prototypical features of the concept as a semantic unit; it provides the comparative and contrastive qualities mentioned by de Saussure. Psychologists are as careful as philosophers in distinguishing between *semantic* (connotative) and *associative* meaning, but ‘associative’ is used for the same purpose as Barthes uses “connotation.” No discipline has developed the minimally differentiating three terms to cope with denotation, connotation in the philosophers’ sense, and associative meaning used by psychologists. Here *denotation* will be used for reference. *Connotation* and *semantic sense* will be treated as synonymous, and used to refer to the sets of criterial or prototypical characteristics that define or capture the concept, i.e. their sense. Ideally this specification would include all the similarities to and differences from cognate and hence confusable concepts. If one follows Wittgenstein’s proposal that the meaning of a word is its use, then this is its semantic sense, provided that there is a consensus among competent users. “Associative” meaning will be used to refer to the personal experience of the words and their referents.

It is to be regretted that terms central to the whole enterprise remain sources of discord and muddle, and there is no way that suggestions offered here are likely to do more than evoke feelings of further regret that we cannot arrange for an *Academie de Communication* to recommend to all relevant journals and publishers and the invisible college of scholars as to which term is to be used to mean what. We lag way behind biologists, chemists, geologists, and physicists in agreeing terms. Some colleagues are simply carefree and careless in not including definitions of terms in the text or in glossaries and inventing their own usage unnecessarily. It is to be hoped that this section will help to carry the reader through the text.

## 1.5 Summary and Implications

The chapter has referred to mundane conversational exchanges, the reflective thinkings of scientists, and the wider contexts of the studies of communication. Any culture is embedded geographically and historically, with a selection of its natural and humanly created objects and events being accorded symbolic significance. While social psychologists have been inclined to focus on the two-person face-to-face (FtF) conversational dyad as having some special significance as the prototypical interactive set of processes, we have to acknowledge the relevance of the givens of climates and cathedrals, TVs and mobile phones, rituals and uniforms, museums

and theme-parks, flora and fauna. The semioticians are entirely right to draw attention to the plethora of possible and actual extra-linguistic vehicles of meanings influencing our lives. Language may be used to refer to and exploit these, but it is easy to see that they also have non-verbal power. Someone desecrating a war memorial might be lynched without words being spoken. A person wearing an invented uniform may derive authority from it. It is no accident that the price of red roses rises for St. Valentine's Day. A setting sun on a Mediterranean verandah can create an ambience that is difficult to achieve in an Arctic blizzard. We shall meet these considerations again in chapter 2 and Table 2.3, where the point will be stressed that all language use occurs in particular contexts that will be relevant to its likely meanings and significance.

That our routine daily contexts are typically treated as shared givens is liable to cause us to ignore how much they presuppose and lead us into the temptation to dash straight into the structures and processes of the conversations which make up the commonest form of language use by individuals in our kind of society, but we must delay. So what is this language system whose use is so liable to be taken for granted?