

# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication is one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but few can define satisfactorily. Communication is talking to one another, it is television, it is spreading information, it is our hair style, it is literary criticism: the list is endless. This is one of the problems facing academics: can we properly apply the term 'a subject of study' to something as diverse and multi-faceted as human communication actually is? Is there any hope of linking the study of, say, facial expression with literary criticism? Is it even an exercise worth attempting?

The doubts that lie behind questions like these may give rise to the view that communication is not a subject, in the normal academic sense of the word, but is a multi-disciplinary area of study. This view would propose that what the psychologists and sociologists have to tell us about human communicative behaviour has very little to do with what the literary critic has.

This lack of agreement about the nature of communication studies is necessarily reflected in this book. What I have tried to do is to give some coherence to the confusion by basing the book upon the following assumptions.

I assume that communication is amenable to study, but that we need a number of disciplinary approaches to be able to study it comprehensively.

I assume that all communication involves signs and codes. Signs are artefacts or acts that refer to something other than themselves; that is, they are signifying constructs. Codes are the systems into which signs are organized and which determine how signs may be related to each other.

I assume, too, that these signs and codes are transmitted or made available to others: and that transmitting or receiving signs/codes/communication is the practice of social relationships.

I assume that communication is central to the life of our culture: without it culture of any kind must die. Consequently the study of communication involves the study of the culture with which it is integrated.

Underlying these assumptions is a general definition of communication as 'social interaction through messages'.

The structure of this book reflects the fact that there are two main schools in the study of communication. The first sees communication as the *transmission of messages*. It is concerned with how senders and receivers encode and decode, with how transmitters use the channels and media of communication. It is concerned with matters like efficiency and accuracy. It sees communication as a process by which one person affects the behaviour or state of mind of another. If the effect is different from or smaller than that which was intended, this school tends to talk in terms of communication failure, and to look to the stages in the process to find out where the failure occurred. For the sake of convenience I shall refer to this as the 'process' school.

The second school sees communication as the *production and exchange of meanings*. It is concerned with how messages, or texts, interact with people in order to produce meanings; that is, it is concerned with the role of texts in our culture. It uses terms like signification, and does not consider misunderstandings to be necessarily evidence of communication failure—they may result from cultural differences between sender and receiver. For this school, the study of communication is the study of text and culture. The main method of study is semiotics (the science of signs and meanings), and that is the label I shall use to identify this approach.

The process school tends to draw upon the social sciences, psychology and sociology in particular, and tends to address itself to *acts* of communication. The semiotic school tends to draw upon linguistics and the arts subjects, and tends to address itself to *works* of communication.

Each school interprets our definition of communication as social interaction through messages in its own way. The first defines social interaction as the process by which one person relates to others, or affects the behaviour, state of mind or emotional response of another, and, of course, vice versa. This is close to the common-sense, everyday use of

the phrase. Semiotics, however, defines social interaction as that which constitutes the individual as a member of a particular culture or society. I know I am a member of western, industrial society because, to give one of many sources of identification, I respond to Shakespeare or *Coronation Street* in broadly the same ways as do the fellow members of my culture. I also become aware of cultural differences if, for instance, I hear a Soviet critic reading *King Lear* as a devastating attack upon the western ideal of the family as the basis of society, or arguing that *Coronation Street* shows how the west keeps the workers in their place. Both these readings are possible, but my point is, they are not mine, as a typical member of my culture. In responding to *Coronation Street* in the more normal way, I am expressing my commonality with other members of my culture. So, too, teenagers appreciating one particular style of rock music are expressing their identity as members of a subculture and are, albeit in an indirect way, interacting with other members of their society.

The two schools also differ in their understanding of what constitutes a message. The process school sees a message as that which is transmitted by the communication process. Many of its followers believe that intention is a crucial factor in deciding what constitutes a message. Thus pulling my earlobe would not be a message unless I deliberately did it as a pre-arranged signal to an auctioneer. The sender's intention may be stated or unstated, conscious or unconscious, but must be retrievable by analysis. The message is what the sender puts into it by whatever means.

For semiotics, on the other hand, the message is a construction of signs which, through interacting with the receivers, produce meanings. The sender, defined as transmitter of the message, declines in importance. The emphasis shifts to the text and how it is 'read'. And reading is the process of discovering meanings that occurs when the reader interacts or negotiates with the text. This negotiation takes place as the reader brings aspects of his or her cultural experience to bear upon the codes and signs which make up the text. It also involves some shared understanding of what the text is about. We have only to see how different papers report the same event differently to realize how important is this understanding, this view of the world, which each paper shares with its readers. So readers with different social experiences or from different cultures may find different meanings in the same text. This is not, as we have said, necessarily evidence of communication failure.

The message, then, is not something sent from A to B, but an element in a structured relationship whose other elements include external reality and the producer/reader. Producing and reading the text are seen as parallel, if not identical, processes in that they occupy the same place in

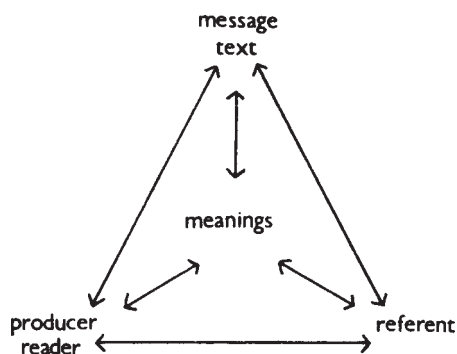


Figure 1 *Messages and meanings*

this structured relationship. We might model this structure as a triangle in which the arrows represent constant interaction; the structure is not static but a dynamic practice (see figure 1).

In this book I have tried to introduce the student to the work of the main authorities in each school. I have also tried to show how one school may illuminate or compensate for gaps or weaknesses in the other; or conversely where the two schools may be at loggerheads, where they may contradict or even undermine each other. Certainly I wish to encourage students to adopt a critical stance in their studies; that is, to be critically aware of their *method* of study as well as their *subject* of study, and to be able to articulate why they are studying communication in the way that they are.

I believe, then, that the student needs to draw upon both schools in order to approach the heart of the matter. The reader who wishes to identify the work of each as it is covered in this book may find the following account of the book's structure useful.

### *The structure of this book*

Chapters 1 and 2 study a representative range of the models of communication produced by the process school. Then chapter 3 moves on to consider the roles of signs and meaning: this contains the theoretical base of semiotics. Then in chapter 4 we turn our attention to the codes into which signs are organized. Both schools are concerned with codes: the process school sees them as the means of encoding and decoding, whereas semiotics sees them as systems of meaning. The study of semiotic theory is further developed in chapter 5 when we study the ways in

which signs signify within a culture. Chapters 6 and 8 are devoted to practical applications: chapter 6 to demonstrations of semiotic analysis, and chapter 8 to examples of empirical studies of message content and of the audience. These were carried out by members of the process school. Chapter 7 introduces some basic ideas of structuralism and shows how they may be applied. Chapter 9 addresses itself to the final and most abstract concern of semiotics—the role of ideology in meaning.

But within this structure I have taken every opportunity to compare the two schools; and I make no apologies for the fact that comments from the process school will appear in semiotic chapters and vice versa, for this is the best way of bringing the two schools into perspective.

Copyright of Introduction to Communication Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.