

Communication in Contemporary Scenario

Its Multiple Dimensions



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The Future of Communication

K.B.S. Krishna

Language is “a system of signs that express ideas” (Saussure, 1915, p. 16), and is the defining feature of being recognized as human. Even a cursory glance of the world around us makes this apparent: while myriad kinds of communication in various stages are present in most creatures, only humans have highly developed verbal communication. Human communication has evolved from a nascent notion of conversation to an art form in the present age. As “complex language defines humans” (Hurford, 2004, p. 551), it is no surprise that verbal communication is often used as a tool to achieve one’s ends and might even be used as a weapon to mould the listeners’ worldview. However, the words that are used to refer an object/activity are often non-onomatopoeic and arbitrary (Saussure, 1915, pp. 67-68). Hence, “human learning of vocabulary involves acquiring the same arbitrary pairings between form and meaning as were used in the previous generation, and in most cases have existed for many generations” (Hurford, 2004, p. 552). This is necessary as communication can only happen when the sender and the receiver share the language that is being used to denote various activities and objects. As Robert Kraas puts it, this language comprises signs and symbols: while symbol represents the arbitrary word chosen to denote the object or activity, sign in verbal communication refers to the

tone and pitch of the speaker (Kraas, 2001, pp. 2-3). Signs, moreover, include gestures and tics, which come under the gamut of non-verbal communication, and become an essential part of the process of getting a message across. Thus, for proper communication, signs and symbols have an equal role to play, and neither should take precedence over the other.

The scenario, however, is utopian, as in the present milieu signs have gained importance over symbols in communication. The present paper is an attempt to show how and when this happens in the present milieu, understand the inevitable problems that result from this, and seeks to figure out the future of human communication given this development.

This problem with communication in the present age was brought home to me due to an incident in the recent past. While walking in the park one evening, I came across a notebook lying on a bench. I idly opened it and saw that on the first page it proclaimed it was "Dermo-dynamix Class Work". Wondering what it might be, I flipped through the book, and saw that it seemed to be the notes taken by a science student. But what "dermo-dynamix" is I could not figure out. It was then that I became aware that two youths aged around twenty years were standing next to me. They were dressed identically in a pair of jeans and t-shirts – with the only difference being that while one flaunted a pig-tail and ear-ring, the other sported a clean-shaven pate. I realized that they were peering over my shoulder at the notebook, and I asked them if it belonged to them. The clean-shaven one claimed that it was, and I handed it over. However, I could not help asking as to what the title page meant.

"Why? There, no? Dermo-dynamix," he replied, and grinned.

I had never come across that word before, and as I am a

language teacher, I was naturally interested in knowing the term. So, I asked: "Dermo-dynamix? What does it mean?"

They looked at each other in askance, and then he remarked: "Engineering subject," pronouncing engineering as "engine-erring". "Tuff to x-plane."

"Oh! You are engineering students, are you? Which branch?"

"Mech.," they responded in unison.

I understood that to mean the branch of Mechanical Engineering, and suddenly it dawned upon me that the book I had picked up was notes that they had taken in the class pertaining to the subject: Thermodynamics – except that they had got the spelling wrong. Somehow that irritated me, maybe it had something to do with me being a language teacher, and I asked them to spell mechanical engineering.

They nudged each other, and finally the one with the ear-ring ventured: "Why? All do."

I took that as a tacit confession that they did not know the spelling, and asked them, though I had no right to, when they were completing their engineering course.

"Doing last sem.," one of them replied, and then winked. "Have one-two carry-overs from last year."

The term 'carry-over' I deduced meant that they had failed in at least a couple of subjects, and had to rewrite their exams.

"What do you plan to do after you are done with your engineering course?"

They did not hesitate for even a moment before replying that they planned to go abroad for further studies and employment, with the United States being their favored destination. Surprised, I pointed out that they had to improve their English language skills drastically if they hoped to succeed. They seemed least bothered by what I said, and

responded they would stay on in India in that case.

By now thoroughly nettled, more by their nonchalant attitude than their ignorance, I remarked rather harshly: "And what do you plan to do? Even here it would be difficult to get jobs with such poor language skills."

If I thought that would flummox them, I was mistaken, as the pig-tailed one immediately rejoined: "Ah! Will open own shop."

By now I was furious: "What shop? You need to know the language even to sell tea."

"Don't need English to sell tea," remarked the clean shaven one.

"Oh, really? The word 'tea' is also English, and, by the way, do you know its spelling? Anyway, can you really communicate in even your mother tongue that you want to sell tea? I bet that you cannot even convey something as simple as 'I love you'."

Irritatingly, they snickered, and then one of them, I forget which, said: "Why do we need to? Will open tea shop next to bus stop or railway station, and customers can smell the tea and will come and buy."

"As for love, I will just give her a hug and a kiss", the other added.

"How would you convey your love if she is not right next to you? You wouldn't be able to pen a love letter," I spluttered.

"Love letters? Who wants a lover so far off? Why have a lover you can't hug or kiss?"

Both of them burst out laughing as if I was too silly for words, and walked off.

I stared after them, and as my anger subsided, wondered at how come we came to discuss their love-lives. But the experience, while anecdotal, is, I believe, universal, as it made

we realize that the importance of language is exaggerated. The two young men had taught me a lesson that to survive and perchance even thrive in the present world one did not need to be language experts. While Marc D. Hauser remarks that "Nothing would work in the absence of communication" (Hauser, 1996, p. 1), the two engineering students had proven that it does not necessarily imply that verbal communication is the only form of communication possible. Moreover, verbal communication comprising only symbols without signs to accompany them can often result in miscommunication.

As movies and literary texts reflect the milieu (Albrecht, 1954, p. 427), an example from the Malayalam movie *Oppam* (2016) by Priyadarshan (b. 1957) would serve to exemplify this. In one of its crucial scenes, the policeman keeps misunderstanding the persons that he is interrogating due to paying too much attention to dialogue and discounting other forms of communication. The policeman instructs a witness to answer his question to the point, and asks him if he was the first person to see the corpse. The witness replies in the affirmative; but the policeman is angered as he has information that the witness was taken to see the body by another. While the witness keeps repeating that he was the first one to view the body, he does not add that the person who had taken him to show the victim was blind and hence, was unable to see the body. The policeman, as he is unaware that the other witness is blind, feels that he is being mocked. If the policeman had observed the body language of the witnesses, he would have realized that one of them is blind. As he does not do so and gives importance to verbal communication, the misunderstanding is inevitable.

Problems arising out of verbal communication in isolation also occur due to the presence of homonyms – and mainly,

homophones. Frequently used as puns in literary texts, they are used by writers to depict misunderstanding and misrepresentation. In Gertrude Stein's (1874-1946) "Sacred Emily" (1913), there is a line which reads: "A rose is a rose is a rose". It is often interpreted to signify how a thing is what it is meant to be; but when I asked my students in a postgraduate literature classroom to interpret it, they came up with a wide range of meanings: From stating that it related to the identity of objects and that a rose can only be a rose and nothing else, they extrapolated to the point where they hypothesized that it was a way to teaching language to babies by the repetition of a single word. Such an array of explanations is in accordance with, what Astrid Lorange writes in *How Reading is Written: A Brief Index to Gertrude Stein* (2014): "[. . .] Stein's attempt to come to terms with the problem of the relation of the *outside* of one's self (what others perceive) and the *inside* of one's experience (what one perceives)" (Lorange, 2014, p. 120). This suggests that perceptions may vary regarding the same object/activity depending upon the cultural baggage that the reader brings along to the reading of a written text.

Furthermore, in a postmodern world, as not only there is hardly any unanimity in perception or understanding of any object/activity but also there is no elitist point of view (Eagleton, 1996, p. 93; p. 113), multiple understandings or interpretations of texts and communications are possible. Eagleton explains this perspective, based on the notion that: "Elitism is a belief in the authority of a select few, which in cultural terms usually suggests that values either are or should be the preserve of a privileged group, self-elected or otherwise [. . .]" (Eagleton, 1996, p. 93). Thus, while everyone might subscribe to their own hierarchy of perceptions (Eagleton 94), any and every perception becomes equally important and meaningful. Hence,

the varied readings of Stein's poem by the class, while seemingly ridiculous, convey the notion that there is no one single effective way of understanding a text. This, when applied to communication, implies that the understanding of a statement made can be interpreted in myriad manners by the receiver/s.

Miscommunication, thus, no longer is an exception but the rule. Such miscommunication might even be desirable in the changing milieu, as Francois Lyotard points out:

Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings [. . .]. But undoubtedly even this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary – at least one adversary, and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation. (Lyotard)

Thus, communication becomes a process of one-upmanship, where each communicator's attempt is to gain an ascendancy over the other, rather than understand and empathize. Such communication goes against the foundations on which verbal language is built upon. Verbal communication, as Saussure points out, exists on the shared knowledge of signifier and signified (Saussure, 1915, p. 102). Saussure, in fact, goes on to say that delimitation is necessary for proper communication using verbal language (Saussure, 1915, p. 103). However, such delimitation is problematic, as perceived even by Saussure in the 19th century (Saussure, 1915, pp. 105-6). The practical impossibility of limiting the meaning of a word or a term is one of the reasons for the failure of structuralism in a world where change is the natural order of things – as it is in postmodern society.

Hence, in the postmodern world, with its avowed allegiance to multiple narratives and non-elitist non-conformist

interpretations of even mundane occurrences, setting boundaries to what a word or a phrase or a term or a sentence can mean is fraught with problems. In fact, it would not be erroneous or too far-fetched to say that the desire to do so is even ludicrous in the current milieu.

A natural inference to draw from this reading of communication as one-upmanship in the present world would be that people no longer want to understand each other. However, this is neither necessarily true nor desirable for any society to function properly. Thus, a new method to comprehend each other is required.

The new method, while doing away with the apparent unnecessary appendage of verbal communication, would be based on an understanding or study of body language. This is crucial as Terence Deacon points out that for humans the “[. . .] defining attribute of human beings is an unparalleled cognitive ability” (Deacon, 1997, p. 21). As humans are emotional beings, the need to express themselves to their fellow beings is indispensable.

However, such emotional expressions, as the engineering students in the afore-mentioned anecdote point out, need not be solely dependent on language. In fact, sometimes, language might be a hindrance to convey emotions. In Raj Kumar Hirani’s (b. 1962) *Munnabhai MBBS* (2003), the decision on the part of the protagonist, a good natured goon, to affectionately embrace an over-worked sweeper in a hospital conveys more to the latter than any words could do. Hirani terms it “*jadoo ki jhappi*”, which in English would be translated as “magical hug”. Hugs, Hirani pontificates in the film, can be magical if given unconditionally without any desire for materialistic benefits.

Hence, while Terence Deacon states that human language

“[...] is one of the most distinctive behavioral adaptations on the planet” (Deacon, 1997, p. 25), in the current world it is superseded in importance by body language comprising expressions and signals. This, naturally, implies that humans would have to forego the advantages of verbal communication as set forth by Charles F. Hockett: “The vocal-auditory channel has the advantage – at least for primates – that it leaves much of the body free for other activities that can be carried on at the same time” (Hockett, 1960, p. 6).

But perhaps the present world has evolved to the point where this is necessary as people no longer believe each other's words. They instinctively place more faith in the signs that others' give such as the tic of an eye, the twitch of a facial muscle, the placement of their palms or legs, or whether they are sucking in their breath or gasping for air, than any verbose proclamation of feelings.

This reversion to body language is not only limited to the conveying of emotional needs, but also in practical materialistic communications. Again drawing inferences from the anecdote featuring the engineering students, it may be stated that business communication is based on recognition of needs and the fulfillment of these needs. As these needs do not require a verbal language to communicate, but, when of a simple nature such as a desire for basic amenities, body language and instinct take precedence.

Furthermore, in the story noted above, the engineering students suggest that customers can smell the tea and purchase it, implying that there are senses other than those used in verbal communication. The vocal and auditory senses are just a couple of the five primary senses. Thus, giving importance to vocal-auditory sense could be interpreted to sanction a hierarchy of senses, and elitist. If other senses, such as olfactory or sight,

are allowed to play an equal role in communication, humans would no longer find themselves at a loss to express themselves due to lack of competence in a/any language.

If such is the future of communication, probably we are well on our way to being animals – except that humans, once they carefully study the elements of body language and the messages that they are sending forth in their various postures, as encouraged by Alan Pease in his *Body Language: How to Read Others' Thoughts by their Gestures* (1981) and C.K. Goman's *The Silent Language of Leaders: How Body Language can Help – or Hurt – how you Lead* (2011), might use it to their benefit, and exhibit studied nonchalance. Such attempts to con the 'other' are, of course, a natural phenomenon and can be explained as resulting from the 'self' distancing itself from and discriminating against the 'other' (J. Miller in Given, 2008, pp. 587-589).

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