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What is Good Communication?

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THE nature of good communication is both ambiguous and ambivalent. This claim can be taken as a reference to the characteristics that *define* good communication, or as a reference to the state of scholarly knowledge *about* the concept of good communication. On its face, the statement seems clear, and yet, in claiming ambiguity and ambivalence, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Such are some of the subtleties of communication itself, and it is such subtleties that require a re-examination of the composition of good communication.

The qualifier "good" suggests a nexus of ethics and pragmatic quality, and this serves as a useful starting point for embarking upon a discussion of communication competence. Communication competence is commonly defined in terms of a continuum of quality, ranging from bad to good. However, what constitutes "bad" and "good" is a considerably contested site in the field of communication and philosophy, as the question naturally suggests intersections with ethics and ideology (Lannamann, 1991, Spitzberg, 1994a, 1994b; Spitzberg & Duran, 1994). Any criterion upon which goodness and badness would be judged carries with it ideological implications, which in turn have implications for the scientific status of underlying theory and operationalization, as well as the practical application of any assessments derived from such a theory. Therefore, the question of what is good communication becomes a rather preminent concern of the communication discipline, and the prospective credibility of the discipline in the larger academic corpus. This paper explores some of the issues entailed in the question: what is good communication.

For some time now, communication scholars have attempted to sound the range and depth of various problematics in conceptualizing and assessing communication competence (Jones, 1989; Spitzberg, 1988, 1989, 1993, 1994c; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989; Wiemann & Bradac, 1985, 1989; Wiemann & Kelly, 1981). Is competence best defined by understanding, clarity, efficiency, effectiveness, appropriateness, or satisfaction? Is competence a set of behavioral abilities or a set of impressions attributed to those abilities? Is competence a set of specific skills, or is it comprised of more general abilities? Is competence a state or a trait? If competence is contextual, cultural and relational, how can we hope to develop, much less teach, general principles of competence? These issues have been debated extensively and several internally consistent models have been proffered (see: Parks, 1985; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989; Wiemann & Bradac, 1985). However, most discussions of competence in textbooks and most assessments employed in research projects or instructional programs do not reflect such introspective angst. Instead, most

approaches to competence, to what is good communication, simply identify a set of "skills" as reasonable candidates, and then generate a set of items to reflect these skills. Such approaches grossly oversimplify the problems intrinsic to a responsible view of good communication, and in the long run, will risk disservice to the credibility of the discipline. In order to develop a responsible program of theory, research, and assessment of competent communication, the following problematics need to be addressed.

THERE ARE MULTIPLE REASONABLE CRITERIA OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

Consider the eye exam as a metaphor for competence. A subject is seated in a room, the lights dimmed, and without artificial vision correction asked to read subsequently smaller and smaller sets of randomly presented letters of the alphabet. Visual competence is determined by the percentage of correct hits achieved in the process of reading these letters. Other tests may be involved, assessing such things as peripheral vision, color recognition, and so forth. At first blush, it seems that assessing communication competence ought to be this objective. But is this assessment "objective" in the sense of being void of subjective criteria? A closer examination reveals several subjective features to this assessment paradigm.

First, the assumption has been made that the reader is acquainted with the alphabet presented. If not, then perhaps a chart for that person's language can be presented. But even so, such an alphabet chart presumes literacy. If the person is not literate, then nonverbal or signs could be presented. But every culture may not recognize the same basic icons as both recognizable and unambiguously something that can be verbally expressed. So the decision of what symbols or signs to display for visual recognition involves subjective elements.

Second, perhaps reading letters of the alphabet is the presumptive stimulus for the test because this competence is particularly relevant to the processes of navigating (i.e., reading traffic signs, instrument panels, etc.) and working (i.e., reading contracts, instructions, etc.) in contemporary society. This type of visual competence is likely far more important to a fighter pilot or computer programmer than to a sculptor or horse-trainer. Certainly it is more relevant to people in a more written culture than a more oral culture. However, "civilized" society has deemed this the most common denominator of visual acuity. Thus, driver's licenses require an assessment of visual acuity based on a person's ability to recognize letters of the alphabet.

Third, the standard 20/20 is ultimately a subjective indicator of competence. Indeed, driving is possible up to 20/40 without correction. So even if the test is objective, the range of scores that are considered "competent" vary, and this variance may be relatively arbitrary. Is a person with 20/45 that much worse a driver than a person with 20/40? In addition, a person with 20/20 vision may still lack key competencies relevant to any number of contexts in which vision is considered. A fighter pilot needs a wide variety of visual competencies beyond just sign or symbol recognition.

The standard eye exam reflects many of the same subjectivities involved in conceptualizing and operationalizing communication competence. Who decides what criteria are relevant to which contexts for what purposes? Such decisions can be made, as they have been for eye exams, but this merely masks rather than divorces such decisions from their ideological and subjective aspects. In order to conceptualize communication competence, the first and preeminent decision is determining the criteria upon which the notions of "good" and "bad" are grafted. There have been several candidates.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is defined as the extent to which a communicator achieves objective(s). Communication effectiveness is not an uncommon synonym for communication competence (e.g., Parks, 1985). As simple as this criterion seems, it masks several complicated issues. First, communicators may not be conscious of their objectives, and thus, may not be very cognizant of their own effectiveness. Second, being unaware of their objectives means preferred outcomes may be achieved by accident, but attributed post hoc as indicators of ability and effort. Third, and related, effectiveness is akin to power, and thus is an extension of attribution principles of identifying oneself as the locus of cause. Yet, there are well-known biases in this process. For example, people are more likely to attribute themselves as the cause of positive outcomes, and others or the context as the cause of negative outcomes (Weiner, 1989). Fourth, in a situation in which only negative outcomes are reasonably possible, effectiveness may be defined as the choice of the least ineffective response. But achieving a bad outcome of any sort is a less intuitive and more complicated notion of effectiveness than many people might prefer. Fifth, effectiveness is potentially judged relative to foregone alternatives, and yet, the outcomes of pursuing these alternatives generally cannot be known given the irreversibility assumption of communication. Sixth, it is difficult to know when effectiveness should be evaluated. Some communicators are willing to "lose the battle in order to win the war," and in so doing, may seem ineffective in the short term but effective in the long term. Related, some research suggests that people sometimes are intentionally ineffective by normative standards in order to get better treatment in other contexts, such as when a person plays "dumb" in order to be placed in an easier class (Spitzberg, 1993). Seventh, effectiveness can imply two very different types of objectives: those of the communicator and those identified by the observer. The objectives of the communication can only be ascertained by the communicator, given that no outside observer has any real access to the person's interior thoughts and feelings. In other words, only I know if I feel I accomplished my objectives in writing this article. In contrast, if objectives are overlaid upon the communicator (e.g., asking a communicator to role-play and provide directions to some location on campus), it is difficult to know the importance and relevance of that objective to the subject being assessed.

An entirely different set of concerns revolve around the ethics of effectiveness as a criterion. It is possible to conceive of communicators achieving objectives through deceit, guile, manipulation, intimidation, threat, coercion, misdirection, ambiguity, and brute force. Perhaps these are the competencies most valued by an entirely objective system of natural selection, but they are hardly the paragons of competence to which most cultures would aspire or choose to reinforce in their educational institutions.

Appropriateness

Appropriateness is one of the most conventional conceptions of communication competence (Larson, Backlund, Redmond, & Barbour, 1978). Appropriateness is generally defined as conformity to the rules of a situation. This definition is flawed. First, while research has shown that people often do have a sense of the rules of a situation, some situations are more rule-governed than others (Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 1981). Further, conformity is problematic in many senses. The hallmark of competence ultimately may not be adaptation per se, but creativity. For example, visionary leaders may conform at some point in the attainment of status, but at a later point deviate from the norm in achieving charismatic status. Thus, appropriateness is better conceived as the perceived fitness or legitimacy of a communicator's behavior in a given context rather than conformity to the previous intact rule structure of the context.

Even this definition, however, raises significant issues. First, it is unclear whose perception is most relevant or important. Most often appropriateness is viewed as a perception

best located in the views of others. Notions of politeness, etiquette, and rule following are generally conceptualized in terms of the sanctions imposed by those who feel affronted by a given person's behavior. The appropriateness of a given performance, in other words, is located in the subsequent evaluations and reactions of others. A person who belches, curses, or answers a cell phone call in a theatre may judge his or her own behavior as appropriate, but those around that person may be less prone to offer the same evaluation. If the *arbiter elegantiae* is located within the individual agent of action, then appropriateness becomes a solipsist criterion with no place for negotiated order.

Second, there may be no criterion that is more contextually, culturally, relationally, and situationally sensitive than appropriateness. If appropriateness is sensitive to all these features, then it follows that there can be no fixed level of appropriateness attributed to a performance or behavior. For example, a laugh is generally viewed as inappropriate at a funeral, and yet there are scenarios in which laughter would not only be appropriate, but inevitable in such a context.

Third, even with the modification of legitimacy as opposed to conformity, appropriateness is ideologically spring-loaded toward maintenance of the status quo. The evaluative anchors of appropriateness are likely based in the existing matrix of rules and contextual definitions. Great art is often rejected in its own time because it is too deviant from the accepted definitions of art. Similarly, appropriateness as a standard of judging competence may be a fundamentally conservative criterion in its tendency to value what exists over what *can* exist.

Satisfaction

Related to effectiveness, satisfaction is viewed as the positively valenced affective response to the fulfillment of positive expectancies (Hecht, 1978). It has been posited as a reasonable criterion of competent communication (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984) under the assumption that better communicators are more likely to achieve their preferred objectives than are worse communicators. However, satisfaction suffers many of the same complexities as effectiveness, given that effectiveness is one of the defining components of the construct of satisfaction. Further, as an intrinsically positively valenced phenomenon, satisfaction cannot cope with lose-lose situations in which there is no satisfying option. Finally, satisfaction is even more ideologically solipsist than effectiveness in that the individual is the sole *arbiter elegantiae*. If the individual is satisfied, if the communicator feels good, then the individual is competent *ipso facto*. This raises significant issues related to values for a civil and ordered society, and in ironic ways, presages several postmodern notions of rejecting grand narratives within which competence might be defined (Habermas, 1970).

Efficiency

Efficiency is defined in terms of the extent of valued outcomes achieved relative to the amount of investment (Kellerman & Berger, 1984; Kellerman & Shea, 1996). A person who can borrow a classmate's notes by simply saying "Can I borrow your notes over the weekend?" has been more efficient than one who engages in an extended apology for imposing, an account of why the notes are needed, and an offer of supplication if the notes are not returned in timely manner and in pristine condition. Again, this criterion is an elaboration of the effectiveness criterion, and therefore suffers most of the same problems. However, it suggests a few unique problems as well.

First, efficiency is little different in metaphorical extension than the Shannon and Weaver conduit notion of communication as circuit. The assumption is that out of several possible channels and messages, only those choices that minimize effort or time are preferable to those that may take more time or effort. It is difficult to fit much of everyday

communication into such a mechanical metaphor. Computers, engines, and production lines seem well suited to efficiency. In contrast, small talk, social support, self-disclosure, conflict, and intimacy, to name a few modes of discourse, seem ill suited to the criterion of efficiency.

Second, similar to effectiveness, in real-time interaction, the effort required of foregone alternatives cannot be known because those alternatives were not operationalized. Consequently, communicators are not in a position to determine efficiency, and external observers can only make such assessments compared to some methodologically or culturally constrained set of prototypical alternatives. Thus, a lonely person may take a long time to formulate a relatively simple plan to court another person. But, if the courtship ultimately works, and the lonely person achieves intimacy, or even love, how would the lonely person or the researcher ascertain the efficiency of such courtship behavior? Is the efficiency of the courtship behavior even pragmatically relevant to such a situation? At most, efficiency seems a qualifier of the quality of effectiveness.

Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude, in reference to communication, is the extent to which the symbol-referent link is well defined in the minds of the interpreters. That is, to what extent are the referents of the symbols being used clearly understood and agreed upon by the symbol users and interpreters? It is closely related to clarity, co-orientation, and understanding, which are common criteria of good communication (e.g., McCroskey, 1982; Powers & Lowry, 1984). Co-orientation and understanding are generally defined as some function of correspondence between the communicative meanings among communicators' minds. There are several versions of understanding, varying in terms of who is included in the equation (e.g., I can feel understood regardless of whether my partner actually understands me) and level of meta-perception (e.g., To what extent do I believe my partner understands that I understand my partner?). Whereas understanding is a psychological variable, clarity is commonly considered a message variable. A clear message may be one that is sufficiently detailed as to answer obvious questions that could arise regarding the symbolic referents of the message, and yet, sufficiently concise so as to avoid "losing" the receiver in the detail. Although the clarity of messages could probably be reliably coded by a group of culturally competent coders, the clarity of a message still relies substantially on the psychology of the audience to which the message is addressed rather than the intrinsic objective features of the message itself.

Despite their extensive intuitive and layperson appeal, understanding and clarity raise a number of problems as criteria of competent communication. First and foremost, it is a myth that clarity and understanding are preeminent purposes of communication (Chovil, 1994; Sillars, 1998; Spitzberg, 1993, 1994a, 1994b). They are clearly *among* the common purposes to which communication is put, but they are generally subordinate to other more valued objectives. A navigator needs to be clear and understood in his or her instructions to a pilot, but how much of our everyday communication is strictly about such "report" functions? What value is there to clarity and understanding, for example, in the daily routine of the greeting ritual? If the purpose of greeting rituals is to renew connections and bonds, then clarity and understanding seem relatively distant concerns to the actual messages produced. It has been suggested that leadership often trades heavily in symbols too abstract to achieve much correspondence of meaning across hearers (Eisenberg, 1984). Perhaps a politician who is truly clear is also truly unlikely to win a plurality of votes. In sum, concerns with appropriateness, the universal pragmatic of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and the importance of belonging to and maintaining intimacy with others all require a finesse of ambiguity, ambivalence, equivocation, and even deception.

Second, and related, there are inklings of research suggesting that perceived understanding is far more important than actual understanding in relationships (Sillars, 1998; Spitzberg, 1993, 1994a, 1994b). That is, people who *think* their partners understand them tend to be much more satisfied in their relationships. People whose partners *actually* understand what each other says and means by their actions tend to be less satisfied than those who merely perceive understanding. It may be that resilient intimate relationships are commonly built upon an edifice of exaggerated hopes and optimism (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Martz, Verette, Arriaga, Slovik, Cox, & Rusbult, 1998), and that actual understanding opens up a plethora of fine distinctions among issues about which conflict and negative affect can arise.

Third, the ethical concerns raised by these criteria are particularly complex. A friend is dying of a wasting disease. Upon visiting this person in the hospital, the patient asks "How do I look?" The response "Hey, you look great," can be understood as a message intended to offer social support. Yet it is also understood to be inaccurate. But is it "clear?" The symbols in the message itself are not clear in their referents, but the intention of the message can none the less be understood. Further, an ironic response of "Hey, you look really terrible" may be relationally understood as an attempt to cheer up the patient. Again, the clarity is in the understanding, but not in the message itself, given the ambiguity of the symbol-referent links and the accompanying nonverbal finesse. These examples suggest a further complexity to these criteria: Meanings are often multiple, complex, and not even fully known to the communicators themselves. Thus, understanding can be a highly malleable and evolving state, one that never attains perfect accuracy because of the ineffable qualities of meaning itself (Branham, 1980).

Task-Achievement

Task achievement criteria of competence are relatively rare in the domain of communication. To return to the eye exam analogy, if certain icons or symbols are shown at certain sizes, then a task achievement criterion would designate a percentage "correct" that a person would be able to interpret. Identifying communicative tasks that can be scaled according to an analogous continuum of proficiency is itself a difficult task. For example, asking subjects to "give directions" to a given location can permit a rough calculation of whether or not a person could get to the designation according to the directions or not. However, directions are themselves subject to considerable interpretation, including taken-for-granted assumptions, receiver adaptation, and shorthand phrasings that vary in their adequacy for any given receiver. Such in situ interactions are likely to display these adaptations in ways that are not easily reproduced in a controlled setting. In addition, seldom is direction-giving strictly unidirectional—those requesting directions often display quizzical looks or ask questions that evoke needed elaboration in directions. Further, closeness counts in giving directions. If the first three moves of a person's directions get the traveler closer to the ultimate destination, it may be much easier to get there than if the first step of the directions is incorrect. Finally, the questions remain "what competence skill is being evaluated, and why?" Giving directions may be a meaningful way of getting at other skills, but it is not clear what these other skills are. The skills that comprise competence are unlikely to be easily reduced to a set of identifiable task achievements that can be generically identified.

Summary of Criteria

What is good communication? The question obviously begs several others. A very clear message can be very dissatisfying, inappropriate and ineffective. A very ineffective message can be very appropriate. A very inefficient message can be very satisfying. And so it goes. These types of frustrations have led many theorists to conceptualize competent

communication along multiple criteria in the hope that hybridizing criteria will permit the limitations of one criterion to be compensated for by the other criterion. The most accepted criterial hybrid is the combination of appropriateness and effectiveness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). The underlying assumption is compelling. Regardless of the ethical and practical concerns regarding either criterion, communication that is both effective *and* appropriate is likely to be higher quality than communication that is one but *not* the other. In other words, if a communicator can achieve preferred objectives in a manner that is perceived as legitimate in the context by those concerned, it is likely to be communication of relatively high quality. Furthermore, it is likely to be higher in quality than communication that is effective but inappropriate or appropriate but ineffective. Finally, communication that is appropriate and effective is also likely to be ethical in that it accommodates the interests and standards of legitimacy of others in the pursuit of self-objectives. Therefore, *good communication consists of messages that are appropriate and effective.*

GOOD COMMUNICATION IS LOCATED IN PERCEPTION RATHER THAN BEHAVIOR

The history of the study of communication is rooted deeply in a "competency" bias. This bias reflects an assumption that good communication consists of a set of identifiable competencies (i.e., abilities, skills, techniques, tactics, etc.) that can be objectively formulated and taught. Indeed, among the earliest beginnings of the study of communication was the sophistic movement in which teachers sought to codify the techniques of persuasive communication that could be imparted to eager (or anxious) clients. This bias has been sustained by the very academic community that self-servingly adopts a presupposition of competency-based instruction. To teach communication is to teach students skills that make the students competent communicators. This bias creates a delusion that competent communication is little more than a package of discrete skills, and that these skills, once inculcated, *comprise* competence.

Any attempt to come to grips with the nature of good communication must rid itself of this delusion. Several arguments lead to the dislodging of this delusion. First, as indicated above, all the available candidates for competent communication criteria are deeply infected with subjectivity. If the criteria of competence are subjective, then any skill claimed to comprise competence is itself subject to subjective inclusion, exclusion, or redefinition. Thus, the skill itself cannot be said to comprise competence.

Second, historical analyses reveal that, at least in the western world, what is conventionally considered as competent communication has evolved through many distinct epochs (Spitzberg, 1994b, Spitzberg & Duran, 1994). The elaborate matrix of elocutionary displays in one era gives way to a more prosaic and concise rhetorical style. The highly conventionalized episteme of 1950s American communication values conformity and cooperation (Duran & Prusank, 1997; Prusank, Duran, & DeLillio, 1993) gives way to the "let it all hang out" 1960s episteme invoking assertiveness as the prototype of competence (Rakos, 1991; Spitzberg, Canary, & Canary, 1994). Obviously, the skills that comprise one era of competence are quite distinct from those that comprise another era.

Third, at a less sweeping level of generality, specific behaviors are easily seen as highly contextual in their competence. For example, only a few conceptualizations of competence have identified humor, wit, or laughter as core competencies. Yet, even these advocates would likely admit that these competencies are not needed, and indeed might be quite incompetent, in many contexts. Thus, it is not the behaviors instantiating these competencies that are competent or incompetent (i.e., good or bad), but the *evaluations* attributed to these behaviors that define their competence or incompetence.

Fourth, there is an ineffability and creativity to competence that a competency bias cannot accommodate. The example above illustrates. Some models of competency would include wit, humor or laughter in their pantheon, and some would not. But what of surprise? Anger? Jealousy? Incredulity? Presumably, such expressions are competent in their place. But such expressive acts are not included in models of competency whereas acts such as disclosure, wit, and composure are. So on what basis is a boundary defined for which skills are included and which are excluded from a taxonomy of competency? If any conceivable behavior or skill can find a competent application in the matrix of potential communication contexts, and if the domain of potential communication behaviors is infinite (Chomsky, 1971), then no taxonomy of competencies can ever hope to be complete.

If good communication does not consist of a set of teachable skills, then of what does it consist? Further, what crisis does this radical departure from two millennia of formal communication education imply? The answer to the first question has already been proffered: good communication consists of people's subjective evaluations that a communicator, or a communicator's performance or message behavior, are relatively appropriate and effective. If this is true, then it begs the second question above. Yet, although this is a radical departure in philosophy of communication instruction, it ultimately implies few changes to the standard instructional model.

The solution proffered by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984; Spitzberg, 1983) is to view the subjective evaluations of appropriateness and effectiveness as a *function of* motivation, knowledge and skills.¹ Thus, what is being taught remains the same. Students are taught to manage their anxiety and identify their goals and motives for communication. Students are taught the rules and procedures for implementing their skills. And students are taught various skills that can be used to perform a multitude of communicative tasks. But, being more motivated, knowledgeable, and skilled does not *comprise* competence. Rather, being more motivated, knowledgeable, and skilled only *increases the probability* that in a given context with a given set of co-actors and a given set of objectives that a given communicator will be viewed by self and others as competent (i.e., appropriate and effective). This model recognizes that a communicator can go into a job interview, for example, and "do everything right" according to the textbooks, and yet still be viewed as incompetent by the interviewer and not get the job. This commonplace realization opens up a more ethical basis for instruction because it does not promise what it cannot deliver. Further, it is more compatible with scientific paradigms of research that seek to validate competence models by investigating the functional relationship between behaviors and outcomes. Finally, this probabilistic approach accommodates the ineffability concern by eschewing a priori boundary conditions. Convention may identify a set of skills that are likely to lead to competent outcomes, but in any given context, there may be behaviors for which convention is blind but that nevertheless display a functional connection to competence.

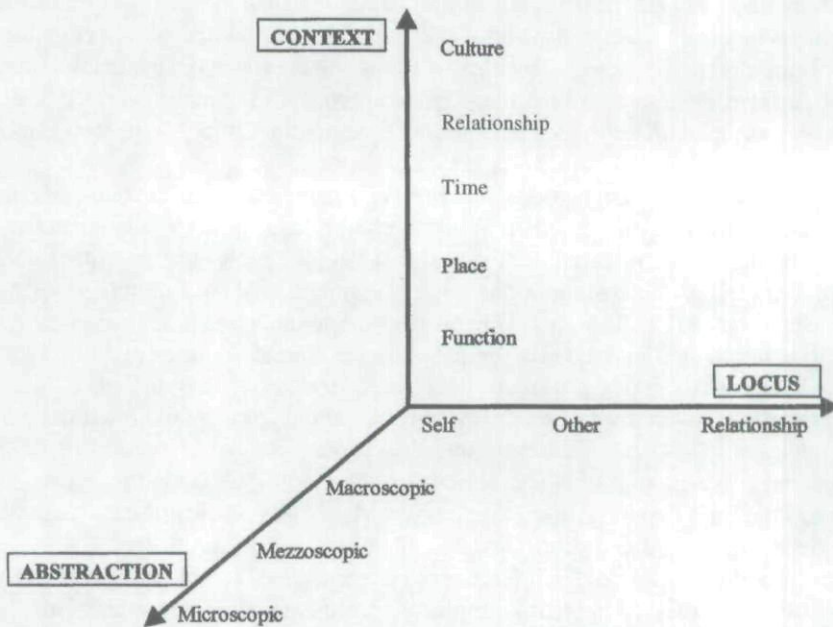
One of the ultimate goals of communication instruction in this model is therefore to identify the probabilities with which communication skills are linked with the outcomes of competence. Instructional invocations would inform students that in a given type of context that engaging in communication skills X, Y and Z produce approximately a 70 percent chance of being viewed as competent. Such *formulations* could be further refined as scholarship refines the contingent and mediating variables that affect this probabilistic relationship. Such invocations seem imminently more responsible than teaching students that doing X, Y and Z *makes* them competent communicators.

GOOD COMMUNICATION IS A FUNCTION OF CONTEXT, LOCUS, AND ABSTRACTION

An architectonic of competent communication requires attention to the factors of context, locus, and abstraction (see Figure 1). There are other factors that influence the contingent relation between behavior and outcome, but these three clearly are among the most ubiquitous and yet least understood (Spitzberg, 1987, 1988, 1989; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). Despite extensive research into these factors, relatively little of this research has sought to integrate them into a larger model of good communication.

FIGURE 1

Key domains across which communication competence varies



Context

The contextual nature of competent communication is accepted as axiomatic by competence theorists and is well established empirically (e.g., Martin, Hammer & Bradford, 1994; Pavitt & Haight, 1986). Yet, the importance of this assumption is rarely reflected in attempts to theorize about the nature of competence. Context unfolds into at least five prototypical dimensions. First is *culture*. Research is extensive that factors relevant to competence are culturally variable (e.g., Collier, Ribeau & Hecht, 1986; Fitch & Sanders, 1994; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1984; Kim, 1999; Martin et al., 1994). Relatively little is yet known, however, about whether culture changes the behavioral content of competence judgments, or the underlying criteria by which competence is judged. For example, is

laughter important in all cultures, varying only in its boundaries of appropriate application, or is laughter evaluated by appropriateness in one culture and by effectiveness in another?

The second dimension of context is *relationship*. The behavior that is competent in one relationship is not competent in another. Relationship as context is further variegated into several dimensions, including intimacy (e.g., stranger, acquaintance, friend, lover, best friend, spouse, etc.), kinship (e.g., parent, child, sibling, cousin, etc.), and stage (e.g., initiation, escalation, maintenance, de-escalation, etc.). Research indicates that competence varies along such dimensions (e.g., Argyle et al., 1981; Hecht, 1984; Hornstein, 1985; Knapp, Ellis & Williams, 1980; Wilmot & Baxter, 1983).

Third, *time* is a vital dimension of context. Time obviously is bound up in culture and relationship as well, but takes on an importance unto itself. Time also unfolds in various ways, including the timing of the minutiae of messages (e.g., pacing, rhythm, pauses, fluency, etc.) as well as more macro chronemic issues (e.g., showing up for appointments early or late, dominating the floor in discussions, etc.). Finally, time underlies the ongoing issue of assigning competence the status of trait or state (Spitzberg, 1987). A trait orientation to competence views it as a dispositional characteristic or tendency for a communicator to display a level of competence. In other words, a trait approach is a tendency to display a level of performance quality over time. A state approach, in contrast, views competent performance as epiphenomenal. Competence one time does not imply competence another time.

A fourth dimension of context is *place*. Behavior may be viewed as competent in one physical environment but not another. While a comprehensive taxonomy of place will probably remain elusive, research does reveal that people tend to organize their perceptions of place in terms of core dimensions, such as formality and constraint (e.g., Argyle et al., 1981; Spitzberg, 1989). Thus, highly expressive communication (e.g., variable volume, broad gesticulation, etc.) may be less competent in the formal confines of a library study room than in a dorm room (e.g., Burroughs & Drews, 1991; Price & Bouffard, 1974).

Finally, contexts vary by *function*, or when intentional, goal. While often not associated with the notion of context, different speech acts often define the frame within which the competence of communication is assessed (Holtgraves, 1986). A conflict elicits different expectations for behavior than a job interview, regardless of the culture, relationship, time or place in which they occur. Different functions define the different appropriate courses through which communication is expected to navigate, as well as the objectives by which effectiveness may be judged. Like places, speech acts may be virtually infinite in their specifics, but they also are perceptually constructed along core dimensions such as evaluation, potency and activity (Wish, D'Andrade, & Goodnow, 1980; Wish & Kaplan, 1977) or appropriateness (Holtgraves, 1986).

If competence varies by all these contextual factors, then how can a parsimonious framework be developed from which principles of competent performance might be gleaned? There are several possibilities, including expectancy fulfillment approaches (Burgoon, Stern & Dillman, 1995; Heise, 1977, 1979; Pavitt, 1982, 1990; Pavitt & Haight, 1982, 1985, 1986; Spitzberg & Brunner, 1991; Smith-Lovin, 1988). In these approaches, the core dimensions of perceiving context can be established as the schemata within which expectations for competent performance are organized. The valence with which a communicator's performance fulfills these expectancies subsequently predicts the perceiver's evaluation of the communicator's competence. In such models, therefore, contextual variations are reduced to more parsimonious dimensional models, and then compared to actual communicator performance. In this way, context is not "out there" as an objective and infinite variety of variables, but is constructed in the mind of the communicator and thereby incorporated into both action and judgment of action. If communicators choose to ignore the conven-

tional formality of the context (e.g., a job interview), then they are redefining what counts as competent within that context.

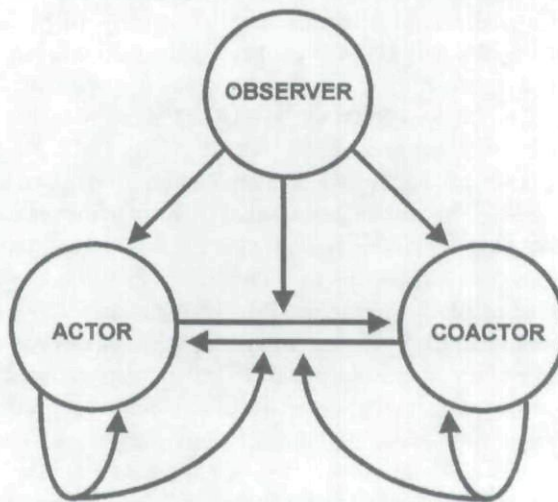
Locus

Locus refers to the location of competence. Because competence resides in the subjective evaluations attributed to a communicator or a communicator's performance, locus refers to both the target of attribution as well as the source of the attribution. Thus, in any communicative act, there are the communicators and potential observers of the communicative act.

As displayed in Figure 2, in the simplest example of a dyadic interaction with an observer, perhaps a researcher evaluating videotape of the dyadic interaction, competence can reside in the following locations. First, the sources of attribution are the actor, the coactor, and the observer. The targets of the attribution are the actor (e.g., "The actor is a competent communicator"), the coactor (e.g., "The coactor is a competent communicator"), or the interaction itself (e.g., "Their conversation was competent"). Furthermore, the actor and coactor are able to judge themselves (e.g., "I was a competent communicator"), each other (e.g., "The other person is a competent communicator"), or the interaction (e.g., "Our interaction was competent"). There is extensive research indicating that there are numerous biases affecting self-judgments relative to judgments of others (Burgoon & Newton, 1991; Fichten, 1984; Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998; Spitzberg, 1987; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989). There is virtually no research attempting to examine the differences between judgments of communicators versus their process of communication as targets of attribution. Regardless, these various locations are likely to affect the nature of competence judgments, and certainly affect the nature of assessment decisions. Eventually, mapping the biases and correspondences among these locations will be essential to developing a workable model of competent communication. This program of work, when expanded, will examine such additional factors as how and under what conditions gender, personality, age, and so forth affect competence in the perceiver.

FIGURE 2

Targets and attributor loci of competence judgments



Abstraction

Abstraction refers to the level of discreteness with which competence evaluations are made. If attributions of competence are viewed as inferences, then there are high-level inferences and low-level inferences. These levels roughly align themselves according to three types of inferences: microscopic, mezzoscopic, and macroscopic. Microscopic inferences refer to judgments of whether or not someone engaged in a given behavior, or the extent to which such behavior was performed. For example, did a communicator make eye contact, or even more specifically, approximately what percentage of the time did the communicator make eye contact when speaking and when listening? Mezzoscopic inferences refer to judgments about the extent to which a communicator displayed a given skill. For example, to what extent did the communicator display confidence or respect? The highest level of inference, macroscopic, refers to judgments about the extent to which a communicator displayed a broad-level trait or state. For example, to what extent was a communicator assertive?

When viewed as a tree diagram, it is reasonable to assume that such inferences are similar to prototype judgments (Pavitt, 1982). Thus, a communicator displays direct eye contact, vocal confidence, forceful expression of rights, speaking turn initiation, avoidance of interruption of other, and listening to the other's opinion expression. These are relatively discrete and microscopic judgments. The eye contact and vocal confidence lead the evaluator to judge the communicator as "confident." The expression of rights and speaking turn initiation lead the evaluator to judge the communicator as "expressive." The avoiding being interrupted and listening to the other person lead the evaluator to judge the communicator as "respectful." These mezzoscopic judgments may then lead the evaluator to judge the communicator as an "assertive" communicator. To the extent that assertiveness is a characteristic schematically associated with competence in the evaluator's mind, then the communicator and the communicator's performance are likely to be viewed as competent at a relatively macroscopic level.

Considerable research has been conducted in the behavior therapy, clinical psychology, and assertiveness literatures that identify what types of microscopic behaviors lead to macroscopic judgments of competence (e.g., Dillard & Spitzberg, 1984). However, relatively little research has attempted to map competence judgments to any taxonomy of skills. This step is necessary if instructional probabilistic formulations are going to be established. Although no taxonomy is likely to be comprehensive, some of the more conventional or empirically-derived taxonomies or lists of skills (e.g., Bubas, 1999; Duran, 1992; Spitzberg, 1994c; Wiemann, 1977) could provide a useful starting point.

FINDING THE FAITH

As a millennial issue, this analysis has intended both to praise *and* bury the old. The field has sought an emergent grand narrative theory of competence but no candidate has yet to gain widespread adherence. Consequently, some have fled or attempted to deconstruct the topic of competence from platforms influenced by post-modernism (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) or ideological criticism (e.g., Lannamann, 1991). Unfortunately, the post-modern becomes anarchistic whereas the ideological becomes fractionalizing and alienating. Both approaches, while having their self-reflective uses, will end up on the scrap heap of logics that fail to attain normative ascension and consensus. However, eventually a viable scientific framework will have to gain acceptance if such trends are to be reversed.

There are as yet no unproblematic criteria of good communication. Good communication is a subjective evaluation and therefore not subject to being codified in strict reductionist models. Furthermore, any choice of criteria or models will be hopelessly contingent

upon the vicissitudes of context, locus, and levels of abstraction. So, is competence dead as an approach to good communication? To the extent that theories die more from inattention than from disproof, competence approaches may be ready for their last rights. However, the problematics of developing a viable theory are all readily accommodated by the framework of competence outlined herein. Competence is ready for revival, if not resurrection. But such a miracle of rebirth will require a fair amount of faith.²

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¹There are other frameworks (Bostrom, 1984), including coordinated management of meaning (Pearce & Cronen, 1980), impression management (e.g., and various intercultural models (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Kim, 1988), to name a few. Each has its merits, and these models are not covered here due to space.

²It may be asked if the author is concerned about whether or not his explanation of good communication is itself good. Scholarship and science are indeed readily self-reflexive, and the question has been on the author's mind. The question would have been of greater concern, but the author already has tenure, so the concern has been largely dismissed.

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