

On Communication Competence

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What is communication competence? Can it be reduced to variable analytics? The variable analytics of mainstream social science presumes that communication competence can be operationalized into measurable, hence, quantifiable, variables. Perhaps for pedagogical reasons, this method of (re)searching communication competence is very convenient. It reduces the difficulties and complexities of instruction and mentorship to the mechanized conveyance of information in the interest of massified education. However, does this process of variable analytics compromise the integrity of the phenomenon itself.? Does variable analytic reductionism. change the essential nature of communication competence?

Think of a competent communicator. It may be your favorite politician or the best professor you have ever studied under. It may be your favorite musician, or the artist who paints what no one else can capture on canvas. Now that you have a specific person in mind, make a list (mentally, not on paper) of all the knowledge and skills that this person had to acquire in order to be the competent communicator that you believe them to be. For example, think about the speech word-for-word, and the gestures and voice patterns. Think about each note they had to play, or each stroke they had to paint. If you were to write these things, give them to a beginner, and said "Do this verbatim.", would they too be competent via automated reproduction of behavior. Of course not. There is much more to competence than just doing the right thing. itself would serve as a hindrance to competence, not a facilitator of it. For example, how could the notes of a song serve as a hindrance to being a competent musician?

In a scene from the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*, Mr. Holland (the music teacher, orchestra director, and composer) was tutoring a young clarinetist. Mr. Holland was puzzled because even though the teenager had played for several years and was excellent at reading notes, her sound bordered horrendous. He asked her, "Do you have fan playing the clarinet?" Confused that he would even ask such a question, she replied "No." Finally, after a brief conversation about her childhood, he asked her to think of something about herself that she liked the most. She said that once her father told her that he loved her hair because it reminded him of the sunset.

Mr. Holland said to play the song again. She looked down at the notes and began to play. He immediately snatched the music book from the stand and said "...without the notes this time." In shock, she asked what

she was supposed to play if she did not have the notes. He gently encouraged her by saying that she had played the song a million times and knew the notes. This time . . . close your eyes and play the sunset." In a moment of musical genius, he recognized that the notes had become a hindrance. After she played, it was obviously the symphony. But, there was a marked difference in the sound - it was much more pleasing to the ear. She had learned the difference between playing notes and being a musician. Now, she was well on her way to becoming a competent clarinetist.

Variable analytics hypertropically foregrounds skills and knowledge in the speculative metaphysical interests of reductionism and empiricism. However, competence can only show itself in the forgetfulness of skills and knowledge. Therefore, any reduction of communication competence must be a phenomenological reduction (which brackets all presuppositions, except that of consciousness itself); not a psychologistic (which presumes the mind/body dualism), nor a physicalistic (which presumes the metaphysic of quantification) reduction. The an alternative view of communication competence after having bracketed the metaphysics assumed by variable analytics. It is an attempt to understand (or stand under), rather than explain (or stand over), communication competence.

Embodiment of Communication

When we observe someone who is extremely competent in communicating, communication is something that is natural for them. They know exactly what to do, when to do it, and how. This means that communication is not a separate entity, apart from them, that they are activating. Instead, the communication is a part of them - it is embodied.

Communication ceases to be a tool, separate from the self, and becomes an extension of the self. According to Merleau-Ponty (1964:62),

Language is by no means simply an instrument or a tool. For it belongs to the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the words of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose. Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language which is our own.

Thus, language is not something that the competent communicator merely uses. Instead, the competent communicator exists in and through the communication. Communication becomes "the medium in and through which we exist and perceive our world" (Gadamer, 1976:29).

To embody communication is to see the self and the communicative act as coexisting. The self becomes manifest and concretized as being through communication. This is how communication is recognized as being embodied. However, what exactly is it that is embodied in the competent communicator—i.e., what is the nature of the communication which is embodied?

According to Gadamer (1976: 63), "Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a with the world itself and how it confronts us." Merleau-Ponty (1973:5 0) advocated a similar idea by saying, "... to learn to speak is to coexist more and more with the environment."

We must be careful of the implications of these ideas. The world itself is not reducible to communication or language. There is a spatio-temporal world of objects (duration, in a Kantian sense) that exists regardless of how, or whether or not we communicate about it. However, insofar as humans are essentially communicative beings, we communicate about this world of objects. Therefore, these objects (and any object available to our consciousness) can only exist in the particular way that they do exist for us in and through our communication about them. As such, the world is essentially communicative. Gadamer (1989:384-385, 443, 457) called this linguisticity. Language is not identical with the spatio-temporal world, but it becomes infinitely close to the things it names (Gadamer, 1976:35; 1989:401) "In all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own" (Gadamer, 1976:62).

Language cannot be solely reducible to a system of symbols which is governed by rules of syntactical, semantical, and phonological natures as linguists would have us believe (Orth, 1973). On the contrary, language is a mode of being in the world, or in a situation. As such, the competent communicator does not provide us with a series of symbols that we must decode. Instead, the competent communicator reveals the world to us as already meaningful. The communication does not represent meaning; it, itself, is "the physical embodiment and expression of meaning which is inseparable from its bodily expression --[it] signifies itself. It is the physical appearance of meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: xiv). Communication Competence in this sense, is not being able to use language well; it is the presentation (Gebser, 1985) of world through communication. Competent communication is "singing the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: xv), not representing it.

Merleau-Ponty (1968:8, 9) further elaborated on the embodiment of communication by discussing the intertwining nature of the body and speech. The body is what enables the self to sense the world—eyes allow

us to see, ears to hear, nose to smell, et cetera. "Thus, the relationship between the things [that I perceive through my senses] and my body is decidedly singular." In a similar sense, it is communication which allows us to share the someone else sees, hears, smells, etc.). In addition, he said

Like the flesh of the visible, speech is a total part of the significations, like it, speech is a relation to Being through a being, and like it, it is narcissistic, eroticized, endowed with a natural magic that attracts the other significations into its web, as the body feels the world in feeling itself. As the world is behind my body, the operative essence is behind the operative speech also... (1968:118)

We know that others can feel the same things that we can feel because we see the visible body that we all have in common. For example, I know that others can feel pain if they are hit hard enough, because I too can feel pain when hit hard enough. As such, I also intuit that speaking is a revelation of the world-as-apperceived through their bodily senses. This is because I know that when I speak, it comes from my body, thus, making it a revelation of the world-as-apperceived through my bodily senses. Thus, the intersubjective nature of communication is perception's salvation from solipsism, giving perception its possibilities of apperception through communication.

This is a necessary premise for communication competence. To recognize someone's competence, there must be intersubjectivity. I must be able to place myself in their position in order to understand the significance of what is happening. For example, to recognize a basketball player that is competent at playing basketball, I must know the rules of the game. I have to know what is allowed and not allowed. I also have to have another basketball player with which to compare this one, possibly myself or even a hypothetical case, but at least a standard for comparison. This is what allows me to recognize and appreciate the oneness (i.e., the embodied nature of basketball) that a competent player reveals when playing basketball. We do not see an individual who is playing the game. It is a person who is at one with the game; the basketball court becomes the home in which their being resides. They appear comfortable, relaxed, effortless, natural. However, I can appreciate this because I know that it is not easy, and effortless, and natural; but, that it took hard work and hours of practice. This understanding is based on intersubjectivity. The same is true for communication. I intersubjectively understand that it is not easy to be at one with what is being communicated. It takes a special quality for someone to be extremely communicatively competent.

The embodiment of communication is an essential feature of communication competence. Communication is not seen as an activity

that one does. Instead, it is the very mode of being the one who is communicatively competent. There is no separation between the communicatively competent person and their communication. They both merge together in the temporal flow of the interaction. The only way to become aware of this is by intersubjectively coexisting in the situation. This intersubjectivity implicates another essential feature of communication competence - the vital connection of self and other.

Vital Connection of Self and Other

With the interconnectedness of the self and other, the premise of intersubjectivity which grounded an understanding for recognizing competence, now begins to unfold into a different dimension. In this dimension, intersubjectivity as an "I" and "you" vanish at the point of a magical awareness of the interaction in which the "I" and "you" become inseparable.

According to Gadamer (1976:65),

A second essential feature of the being of language seems to me to be its I-lessness. Whoever speaks a language that no one else understands does not speak. To speak means to speak to someone. The word should be the right word. That, however, does not mean simply that it represents the intended object for me, but rather, that it places eyes of the other person to whom I speak... To that extent, speaking does not belong in the sphere of the "I" but in the sphere of the "We"

This is what is happening when all of those who are involved in the interaction or witness the interaction become completely encaptured. The speaker, of communication all become consolidated into one-ness in submission to the text of communication itself. For example, there are times when professors may be completely encaptured with the lecture. It seems like everything is going great, the words are just coming naturally, and everyone's attention is magically riveted in submission to the interaction. The audience is in awe. They have become wrapped up in the communicative event. At this moment, there is no distinction between the self and others, the professor and the students, the speaker and audience, person to person, et cetera. Through the text, they all co-relate to one another as one.

Gadamer (1976:17) said, "Genuine speaking, which has something to say and hence does not give prearranged signals, but rather seeks words through which one reaches the other person..." Thus, at every moment in the communicative interaction, the speaker (or author) considers the audience (or reader). The expression of the communication and the understanding of it become one in the same. The audience is constantly considering what the speaker is intending by what is being said. Intentionality and consequentiality become one in the same, thereby

rendering each irrelevant for the moment. This combined involvement of both parties becomes apparent in the continual dissolution of boundaries which demarcate the space between positions. Each party becomes both "positions" simultaneously. To "be in" both "positions" simultaneously makes the distinction inconsequential. Logically speaking to hold both "positions" is to hold no "position". Positionality and rigidified boundaries fade as all is in flux. Instead of an "I" and a "you" communicating to one another from each respective position, it becomes a "we" caught up in the communicative phenomenon.

Merleau-Ponty (1968:11, 13) discussed the we-ness of communication by declaring the following in regards to the private worlds of communication,

... how could I conceive, precisely as his, his colors, his pain, his world, except as in accordance with the colors I see, the pains I have had, the world wherein I live? But at least my private world has ceased to be mine only; it is now the instrument which another plays, the dimension of a generalized life which is grafted onto my own ... It is therefore indeed true that the 'private worlds' communicate, that each of them is given to its incumbent as a variant of one common world. The communication makes us the witnesses of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing.

... it is the same world that contains our bodies and our minds ... which connects our perspectives, permits transition from one to the other ... and which makes us feel we are two witnesses capable of hovering over the same true object or at least of exchanging our situations relative to it, as we can exchange our standpoints in the visible world in the strict sense.

The world in which communication occurs is essentially shared. There is always a "we-ness" in communication. This is also demonstrated in other works: such as, Goffman's *Interaction Ritual*, and Hall's (1976) concept of synchrony and syncing. However, these works reduce the shared nature of communication to a behavioral level. This is very limited. Behaviorism necessarily reduces syncing to two subjective parties who coordinate movements with one another. However, there is no other in syncing. The other is already presumed immanent within the self. Thus, synchronicity is always given, or made im-mediate, at the level of transcendental constitutionality which goes beyond contingent (behavioral) cases, and into the essential realm of the phenomenon itself. This is the level at which Gadamer and Merleau-Ponty attempt to articulate—the level of apodictic experience—while behaviorism remains contingent.

Thus far, it has been advocated that communication competence entails the embodiment of communication which is coexistent with a vital connection of the self and other which becomes a "we-ness." Essentially,

at this point, there is a unity of the topic, the speaker/author, and audience/listener/reader. All are in perfect unison as they are concretized through the text. None could exist without the others. As there is a vital connection, the two always jointly submit to the communication itself. The we-ness becomes a continually unfolding dimension of submission to the communicative act itself in our consciousness of communication competence.

Joint Submission to Communication

Gadamer (1976) used the analogy of a game to describe the dynamics of communication. The game is characterized by movement which is not the consequence of subjective attitudes. Instead, it is the obeying of the rules of the game that allows one to become competent. In this sense, there is a transcendental attitude that guides that of the subjective entities involved in the game. As such, every one's movement directly corresponds to the movement of everyone else's. It appears that one knows the movement of the others' at the exact time that it happens - almost as though they anticipate the movement. In a sense, they are in more than one place at the same time - they are in the "self" and in the "others" simultaneously. The movement of the other is im-mediate as the movement of the self. All movement becomes an "our". This perfectly orchestrated coordination of movement is made possible in and through the submission to the game.

This complete submission allows freedom within the boundaries of the game. As one completely possesses the game (by their submission to it with the others), they simultaneously become possessed by the game. This completeness of being in the game allows for freedom to exist in and through the game because action is able to spring forth in a "self-forgetfulness". It is not lack of self-control, but rather, the freedom to exist completely in and through the game itself. Playing the game becomes being the game. Gadamer (1976:54) summarized the game by saying that "We can formulate this idea as a theoretical generalization by saying that the individual self, including his activity and his understanding of himself, is taken up into a higher determination that is the really decisive factor."

This also describes what we observe in someone who is extremely competent in communicating. It is obvious that they have mastered the skill; however, there is also a sense in which the skill has mastered them (Gadamer, 1976:87). Their speaking is so free flowing and natural that it is as if they are being led by the act itself. It is not that they are searching for the right words, trying to do the right thing in the appropriate way. Instead, there is apparent effortless - as though they are being guided by the communication. To know the exact right

thing to say, in the exact right way, within a certain context, at the exact right time, is a lot to be able to do. However, the competent communicator makes it appear easy because all of these dimensions have collapsed into the simplicity of one-ness in which the communicators submit themselves in self-forgetfulness through the playing of communication.

It has been advocated that when we are awaring communication competence, we are awaring the embodiment of communication as it is manifest in the communicative act. Intersubjectivity, which is required for this awareness, continually unfolds into the we-ness of communication. As such, the we-ness is made concrete in the joint submission to communication. Here, all dimensions of competent communication are acknowledged as a oneness. There is complete unity among the speaker/author, the text/message, and the listener/reader. This unity is observed in our consciousness of—of communication competence.

Conclusion

By bracketing the metaphysical assumptions commonly used to explain communication competence in mainstream social scientific literature, we have been able to articulate some essential features of communication competence. In our consciousness of.. communication competence, there is the embodied nature of communication. The communication is a natural part of the competent communicator. Communication becomes an extension of self.

The embodiment of communication presupposes intersubjectivity. In order to recognize a competent communicator, I must be able to stand in their place and intuit the difficulty of what they are doing. This enables me to see the embodiment through the possibilities of disembodiment - or lesser degrees of embodiment.

This intersubjectivity, which provides the pre-condition for recognizing embodiment, then unfolds into a different dimension of communication competence. This dimension is the we-ness of communication. The "I" and "you" of intersubjectivity fade into oblivion through the continual fluxing of author and reader, speaker and listener. The "other" is always already presupposed in recognition of self. The one constantly considers the other, rendering the distinction void.

The unity of the "self" and "other" (or author and reader, speaker and listener) necessitates an awareness of timelessness and spacelessness as in magical consciousness (Gebser, 1985). This magical awareness is concretized in the joint submission of all to the interaction itself. In this instant, all become part of a transcendental force that guides the

interaction. Through this joint submission, there arises the freedom to completely exist within the interaction. The competent communicator expresses the wholeness of their being through the communication.

Perhaps a good way to illustrate the difference between this understanding of communication competence and a variable analytic explanation of it (as is commonly seen in mainstream emphases on skills, knowledge, et cetera) is to provide an analogy. Communication is to the competent communicator as musical notes are to the competent musician. Imagine a beginner playing the song. They struggle from one note to the next in a desperate attempt to hit each note accurately, just as they have been taught. They constantly look at the sheet, then back to their hands, then to the appropriate key. The overall picture is very disjointed. The song is not quite a song; it is merely a series of notes that have been strung together. It is the person is just beginning. They are learning the mastery of the skill which takes hours of practice and dedication.

On the other hand, what happens after hours of practice and dedication? There is a fluidity of action. The hand movements are all perfectly coordinated. It looks as though the hands themselves anticipate where to go next, as if they are already there. When they look at the sheet, if they even need to, they do not see musical notes; they hear sounds. But not isolated sounds; each sound is blended with the next sound and the one before it. It is now music through notes. In the peak of competence, the song may never be played the same way again because each time it is played, in submission to the act of playing, the song itself takes on a new life. The audience is in complete awe. They feel the passions of the musician as they are concretized in and flowing through the music itself. All are encaptured by the performance. It is no longer a performance. For the encaptured, it is being. Have they mastered the song, or has the song mastered them? The inability to distinguish, the indeterminacy, is where competence lies.

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