

CAUSES OF COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS AND THE METHODS OF AVERTING THEM IN THE COURSE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

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As of today, the communication standards of societies based on face to face relationships and acquaintanceship networks, formed at the age of Industrial Revolution, has gone through an essential change. In our accelerated, modern world our relationships and interactions are basically characterized by depersonalization. In our everyday life, most people we meet – e.g. doctor, shopkeeper, repairman, postman, teacher, colleague – are strangers to us, in spite of getting in contact and communicating with them multiple times, or even on a regular basis. Amongst “modern” circumstances, social interactions and communication are becoming more and more of a challenge for modern man, as they require several skills (communication / language competences, behavioural culture, rhetoric, self-awareness and understanding of human nature).

An integrated part of our social interactions is the perception of our partners, the correct interpretation and understanding of their behaviour. At the same time, it is only the first step, which by itself is insufficient, as our social relations are primarily based on the regulated exchange of messages, or in other words: communication. In a most generalized sense, communication can be defined as the exchange of information between the sender and the receiver. Upon recalling Jakobson’s model, human communication can be defined as a technical process, in whose course information transfer, information exchange occurs: by the help of a pre-defined code (set of symbols), the sender formulates (codes) information (message), which is channelled to the recipient (receiver), who then decodes it. According to this theory, communication has four essential elements: 1) the sender, who codes, 2) the receiver, who decodes the message, 3) the message, 4) the channel, through which information (message) is transmitted to the receiver.

In practice, the progress of human communication is a chain-like process: the communicator pursues to share its feelings that could be formed concerning either the communication partner, the communication situation or the communication environment with its surroundings. Its intention to speak is manifested in a particular expression form

(gaze, smile, touch, words or gestures). The recipient perceives the verbal or non-verbal expressions of the communicator. This perceived expression triggers a particular sentence in the receiver, who interprets the intention of the communicator based on this, and then forms an opinion about the communicator as a person. The progress and success of communication is essentially influenced by all of these factors; thus any stage of the chain can be a potential cause of miscommunication.

The efficiency of our communication depends on three basic factors, thus it can be arranged around three questions (problems): 1) Who says? (Problems emerging on the communicator's side) 2) How it has been said? (Problems emerging from the use of a chosen code) 3) Who it has been said to? (Problems emerging on the receiver's side).

I. A. Richards, professor of Cambridge University – renowned representative of semiotic traditions of communications research – upon research of the operation of words, came to a conclusion that words are special signs, arbitrary symbols, with no inner meanings. The “Proper Meaning Superstition”, an actual misbelief, stating that words have precise, definite meaning is linked to him. Meaning is not carried by words or other symbols, but people themselves instead (Griffin 2001: 39). In order to demonstrate this, together with C.K. Ogden, they created the Semantic Triangle, which points out the relationship between symbols and their hypothetical references (also see: Griffin 2001: 39–40).

Scientist representing an approach to communication based on semiotic traditions realized that in our way of thinking, visual associations have an emphasized role. Referring to this recognition, Griffin draws attention that a tendency for picturesque thinking also influences the way people interpret interpersonal messages. “Interpersonal communications can be defined as a process creating a commonly accepted meaning in unique situations, however, the validity of the definition only depends on what kind of ideas are triggered.” (Griffin 2001: 50). In order to demonstrate this, Griffin compares interpersonal communications to 3 characteristic games (bowling, Ping-Pong, Charades role-play) (Griffin 2001: 50–53). Out of the 3 games – in our case representing 3 communication models – interpersonal communication can be compared most to charades, as it is “a mutual, ongoing process of sending, receiving, and adapting verbal and nonverbal messages with another person to create and alter the images in both of our minds. Communication between us begins when there is some overlap between two images, and is effective to the extent that overlap increases. But even if our mental pictures are congruent, communication will be partial as long as we interpret them differently.” (Griffin 2001: 52).

The following models also interpret interpersonal communication as similar to role-playing: Symbolic Interactionism Theory of George Herbert Mead, the theory of W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen about Coordinated Management of Meaning, Judee Burgoon's theory about Expectancy Violations and the Interpersonal Deception Theory of Judee Burgoon and David Buller (see also Griffin 2001: 54–103). A common

feature of all four theories that they all reject both the simplified bowling-model and the interactions-based Ping-Pong model of interpersonal communication, and similarly to role-playing model they emphasize that interpersonal communication is “a complex transaction in which overlapping messages simultaneously affect and are affected by the other person and multiple other factors.” (Griffin 2001: 52–53).

Along this set of ideas it is worth to mention another communication theory – Social Cultural Traditions, which is based on the assumption that culture is recreated during communication, as the structure of a language affects the ways in which its respective speakers conceptualize their world. The theory of Linguistic Relativity is linked to the emblematic figure of social Cultural tradition, Edward Sapir and his disciple, Benjamin Lee Whorf, suggesting that the structure of the language of a given culture also affect the thoughts and actions of the individual. (Griffin 2001, Neményiné 2004). Upon investigating correlations between language and thinking, the linguistics of Chicago University came to the conclusion that language defines thinking: “diverse languages are not only alternative tools for the description of the same reality, but (...) people speaking different languages presumably also have different conceptions about their world.” (Forgas 1998: 138). Nor only linguistics, but also anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers deal with the issue of finding out how close is the relationship between language and thinking. The researches are built upon two essential issues: 1) To what extent does cognitive, conceptual development affect linguistic development and the ability to use language (see also Pléh–Lukács 2014: 443–574); 2) To what extent does language (its word collections and grammar structures) affect the thinking and ideology of its users (Pléh–Lukács 2014: 859–876).

After the short introduction of some communications model related to our subject, let us return to the issue of the efficiency of our communication. Assuming the existence of three factors (communicator, shared code, receiver), the first step in order to recognize communication problems is to investigate that in the course of communication by whom, how and to whom is the information sent. It is also important to identify the factors that – on behalf of both the communicator and the receiver – can cause communication problems, and to locate erratic factors of the shared code that can lead to communication issues.

Let’s start with the factors emerging on the communicator’s side. Concerning the communicator of the message, a substantial factor of influence is the conceptualization of the receiver and the communication situation: the way the communicator regards the receiver and the relationship with him/her according to first impressions, determines speaking intention as well as its expressions. In other words, communication objectives (communication intentions) are highly influenced by the communicator’s image about the receiver. Beyond various communication objectives, every communication

situation has its constant elements: 1) maintaining constant control over the situation and the partner, and 2) creating an impression.

Beyond communication intentions, the efficiency of communication is essentially influenced by the communication skills of the communicator. This competence does not only include communication channels (verbal and non-verbal channel) and the ability to use sign-variations (how extended is the scale of verbal and non-verbal expression tools possessed and used by the communicator, and how diverse are its way of expressing itself adapting to the communication skills of the receiver) but also the sensory and perceptual sensitivity towards the communication of the partner (how much it is able to understand and interpret the expressions of its communications partner), as well as the rigidity or flexibility of the partner's image. This latter one is the ability that helps to communicator to adjust the preliminary image (first impression) of the partner according to the new informations achieved in the course of the communication.

Efficiency of communication is also determined by the shared code. There has to be a consensus in the use of the symbols and meaning content of the shared code (as for example the word "patika" refers to a pharmacy in Hungary, while in Vojvodina it means "sneakers"). Beyond identical meaning content, the possibility of the shared code is also provided by the operational identity of the muscle groups connected to the communication channels (see the pronunciation of /e/ in literary Hungarian language and in "palóc" dialect. The third factor concerning the use of the shared code is the shared socialisation process (see the meaning content of preciseness: "We meet at 10". In practice, it can mean 10 minutes to 10, precisely 10 o'clock, or even 10 minutes past ten o'clock; moreover, there are cultures, where setting out a time this way has only "informal" meaning.)

The code exists, regardless of the individual, and is received from society "as it is" – the individual is actually born into the meaning content of a given code, as instead of having to invent or construct it, the "only" responsibility is to learn it. However, the extent of learning it varies individually, which can be a possible source of communication problems.

Efficiency of communication does not only depend on the communicator and the use of the shared code, but also on what extent is the receiver able to perceive, understand and interpret the signs of the partner. Neményiné Gyimesi Ilona draws our attention to the importance of distinguishing "the reception of the stimuli and signs received through our sensory system from the meaning assigned to perceived impressions." (Neményiné 2008: 47). This process is perception itself, in whose course the stimuli ensuing from sensory experiences are transformed into a comprehensible image and meaning in the mind of the individual engaged in communication. This "key stage" of the communication process is not else but a "decoding contraption". The operation

of perception mechanism is based on the schemes the individual constantly learns during the course of life. Perception process itself has two stages: first stage is the reception of stimuli. Reception of stimuli always occurs in a selective manner. From the infinite number of stimuli (occurrences, things), human brain only selects those that it considers most important, most determinative, most conspicuous. This selection depends on 3 factors:

1. intensity of the stimulus (most obvious, loudest...);
2. actual needs (in heat, the sense of thirst selects the stimuli potentially leading to its termination);
3. expectations (termination of thirst can occur in several ways: from a public water tap, by consuming soft drinks or mineral water bought in a store or by having a drink in a restaurant).

Due to the occurrence of selection upon stimulus reception during the first stage of perception, human brain is unable to evaluate the events, actions occurring in the direct environment of the individual as equal. That is why the experiences gained during previous conversational, communicative situations are necessary, as they help to convert the incomplete picture consisting of the selected stimuli arriving from the environment, into a sensible, logical, complete image. It is important to emphasize that one of the reasons of communication problems (misunderstandings) is selection, and the interpretation standards, schemes of the receiver. Another reason can be traced back to our feelings occurring during conversational situations: based on the feelings and emotions occurring in the course of communication, the receiver unconsciously interprets the intentions of the speaker and classifies the person itself. It is important to emphasize that it is not a conscious element of the process, as usually we cannot exactly identify the causes triggering our positive or negative feelings towards our conversational partner. On the other hand, we have a concept, we “know” what the purpose of the speaker is, and how we classify him/her according to this intention. Our responses, intentions are formed on the basis of this knowledge “deemed as objective”.

After the investigation of the problems emerging because of the communicator, shared code or the receiver, now let’s look at some other factors that can also lead to communication problems. The first coefficient to be taken into consideration is the different perspectives of the communication participants. In a conversational situation, the partners always see things from a different perspective. Of course these perspectives can overlap, but the difference always have more significance. Due to the respective mind-set, worldview of the participants, and to the nature of conversational situations, the different perceptual approach of the participants at the beginning of a communication process is a natural thing, as this difference can be attributed to:

1. Non-identical nature of the facts known by the conversational partners,
2. Different interpretation of knowledge (due to the nature, character of the perception process),
3. Different feelings of the partners concerning a specific subject.

It is important, that the participants of a communication would express that this distance in their perspectives is typical to the beginning of a communication process, and basically can be attributed to the lack of information. Starting situation can become a communication problem, if the partners ignore this particularity of this stage. In this case, the partners invest more and more time, concentration and energy in the progress of communication to justify their own standpoint or perspective, as they only consider it as complete, while not listening to, not interpreting, not accepting any new information coming from their partner. The decrease of their receptivity, openness towards new informations maintains or extends this gap of perspectives, thus communication gets stuck, hits dead end, and the partners actually have two different conversations. This phenomenon is called as a communicational trap.

It also important to mention the four conversational situations, where information is lost because of other factors:

1. *Things can be said, but not heard.* In the course of perception, about one third of spoken information is lost. It is usually caused by the selection of inducements, tiredness of partners, lack of attention or noisy physical environment. It is important to know both for the speaker and the receiver that there is always a difference between spoken and heard information. Loss of information is not only typical to the beginning of the conversation, but it is present in the whole course of the communication process. As this phenomenon is present throughout the whole of the process, it is important to strive for as small amount of information loss, as possible. In order to achieve this, the speaker should always pay attention to emphasize the information considered as important for example by adjusting speech volume, by accentuation, gestures and by the use of short pauses inserted into his message. The speaker does not have to rely exclusively on vocal tools in order to let his message be heard by the receiver, but can also use illustrations, visual instruments, e.g. projecting the outline of the presentation, drawing figures, sketches or data. At the same time, it is important to mention that the amount of visual data, information should not spoil the quality of verbal communication, so the principle of “less is actually more” should be followed. The amount of written data should not be exuberant, illustrations should not be complicated, as the receiver has to interpret these, which takes time, in whose course

further information can be lost. The amount of delivered information and talking speed also requires attention. Fast, jabbering speech becomes untraceable for the receiver, while slow talking tempo results in loss of attention due to unused brain capacity.

2. *Things can be heard but not understand.* Concerning the efficiency of communication, the sphere of significant factors is not exclusively limited to what the partner hears, as what he actually understands is even more important. Understanding of the received information essentially depends on the recipient's skills in the given subject, vocabulary, education, intelligence, ability to listen and concentrate. For the sake of efficient communication the active participation of all of the partners is very important: this activity is an essential requirement both on the communicator's and on the receiver's side. The communicator has to pay attention not to transmit too much information at once, to use appropriate talking speed, and to avoid monologues longer than 5-10 minutes in the course of communication (except when holding a speech or presentation). Concerning the amount of transmitted information it is worth remembering that human brain is only capable of accepting a limited amount of information: 3-5 pieces of new information is the optimal amount that partners can easily deal with. Talking speed is also worth monitoring because new ideas, correlations are not only have to be heard, but also to be understood; which requires time on the receiver's side. Communication problem, misunderstanding can occur if the speaker cannot estimate the actual knowledge, skills of the receiver, barely assuming them. A regular incident, especially concerning vocational communications, that the communicator under or on the contrary, overestimates the shared evidence basis of the communication partners; which in the former case results in dedicating too much attention and time to explain ideas and correlations, thus "overtalking" the issue, while in the latter case in a false assumption of the knowledge and identity of the used terminology.

Communicational performance can be increased by the use of tools: the application of visual aids can positively influence understanding. Figures, drawings created at the location of the discussion can be very effective as they turn into a basis of shared information. A communicator also have to learn to be able to concentrate a significant part of his attention on the partner and its reactions during conversation, as this way he can receive feedback about what the partner has heard and understood from the transmitted set of informations. The listener's, receiver's activity on the other hand means that the partner not only listens or even takes notes, but also sends continuous feedback towards the communicator. Feedback can also be provided by the use of non-verbal channels: expression, nodding, gestures; and through a verbal channel also, by asking questions that help in the interpretation, preciseness, or by summarizing the heard information.

3. *Things can be understood but not accepted.* For the sake of efficient communication it is important to hear and understand the message. The acceptance or refusal of the content of the message is not a communicational problem.
4. Contrary to the third situation, the 4th case, when: *The speaker may not recognize what the partner has heard, understood and accepted,* is also considered as a communicational problem. In this case it is important to know, how we can make our communication successful by the increase of the efficiency of the aforementioned speaking and receiving roles both as a communicator or a receiver (Neményiné 2008: 53–57).

Thus, in conclusion, the factors causing communication problems both on the communicator's and the receiver's side are: the conceptualisation of a specific situation, impressions concerning the partner; while from the communicator's aspect these are: communication objectives and communication ability; and on the receiver's behalf the ability to decode. Apart from communication partners, the source of misunderstandings, communication problems can also be the lack of shared code, the different worldview or perspectives of the partners, and the loss of information.

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