# CONTEXTS
## of Communication

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# CONTEXTS OF
# COMMUNICATION

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# PREFACE

Like anyone who interacts in a social context, I have experienced quite a few communication collisions, minor and major, short-term and long-term, professional and personal. In choosing the readings for this collection, I reflected on those moments of communication breakdown, along with other, more satisfying exchanges in which I was by myself, in small groups, or the proverbial face in the crowd. I have found the readings that follow to be personally beneficial, and ones that communication scholars consider important contributions to the study of effective human interactions.

The collection begins with articles on communication "basics"—the fundamental communication ingredients in any social interaction. This section includes descriptions of communication models, general principles and terminology, and perspectives on the process of communication. The next seven sections present concepts of communication interactions that are specific to the context in which they occur. The contexts range from self-communication and interpersonal communication to public communication and intercultural communication. In each section, the readings explain the communication processes and problems common in that setting. In the final section, four articles suggest how the concepts and contexts of communication are evident in specific professions.

These thirty-one articles are so inclusive and coordinated that instructors can use the book as the core text, supplementing the articles with class discussions, projects, and research assignments. The collection can serve also as an auxiliary to any number of basic texts.

Several criteria were used in selecting the readings for this anthology. Each piece had to be readily understandable to students with no prior knowledge of communication theory or principles. Each had to present a significant concept or illuminate a particular type of communication setting. The selection had to qualify either as a "classic" contribution to the study of communication or as a contemporary formulation reflecting current directions. I chose many recent publications for their excellent reviews of past research that also provide the most current discussions and tests of the information in question. A final criterion in making the selections was that each reading had to have impressed my own students as being of interest and practical value.

To assist readers in identifying important communication concepts, my introductions to each article describe the major points of information and the underlying theme and progression of the article. Where appropri-

ate I also have indicated how the specific information relates to other selections and applies to everyday situations.

Not all the readings I have chosen will please every individual interest, but I am confident that readers will find that the majority of the writings provide genuinely important additions to their knowledge and practice of communication. If readers go on to more satisfying interactions in a variety of settings, my goal in preparing this collection has been met.

I wish to thank the following reviewers: Fern Johnson, University of Massachusetts; Uvieja Good Leighton, University of Arizona; Leland L. Nichols, California State University; Ben L. Parker, Boise State University; Cordell Parker, Tarrant County Junior College; Carol A. Roach, University of Alabama at Huntsville; Larry A. Samovar, San Diego State University; Barbara Walker, Florida State University.

J. M. C.

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OSCAR: I'd be immensely grateful to you, Felix, if you didn't clean up just now.

FELIX: (Puts dishes on the tray) It's only a few things. (He stops and looks back at the door) I can't get over what Murray just said. You know I think they really envy us. (He clears more stuff from the table)

OSCAR: Felix, leave everything alone. I'm not through dirtying-up for the night. (He drops some poker chips on the floor)

FELIX: (Putting stuff on the tray) But don't you see the irony of it? Don't you see it, Oscar?

OSCAR: (Sighs heavily) Yes, I see it.

FELIX: (Clearing the table) No, you don't. I really don't think you do.

OSCAR: Felix, I'm telling you I see the irony of it.

FELIX: (Pauses) Then tell me. What is it? What's the irony?

OSCAR: (Deep breath) The irony is—unless we can come to some other arrangement, I'm gonna kill you! That's the irony.

FELIX: What's wrong?*

If you're wondering what this excerpt from Neil Simon's The Odd Couple has to do with an introduction to readings in communication, consider the following aspects. You may be surprised.

First, what strategies do Oscar and Felix use in communicating? Gerald R. Miller's article provides important information on the workings of what we call "communication." With this knowledge about models of communication, their functions, and their shortcomings, we can understand better the conflict between Felix and Oscar and predict their continued interaction.

Second, regardless of the nature of the conflict, most people would agree that Felix and Oscar are communicating. Their interaction is dynamic—both are sending and receiving messages at the same time. Their interaction is irreversible—the messages have been expressed, and they cannot be taken back. These observations are just two features of the transactional approach to communication, a prominent viewpoint that C. David Mortensen elaborates upon in the next reading. Another perspective on communication, also widely accepted, is described by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don D. Jackson in their seminal work, The Pragmatics of Human Communication. In this reading they describe complexities in message content and in the relationship of persons who communicate. One of the most often cited axioms of communication stems from their work: "you cannot not communicate."

Finally, once we have analyzed this brief exchange between Felix and Oscar using models of communication and two theoretical

orientations to communication, the question remains, "What might Felix and Oscar do to improve their relationship?" A number of recommendations have been researched and tested, and Mark L. Knapp reviews them in his discussion of effective communication. He presents various systems for identifying effective communicators, and it is likely that Felix and Oscar (and you and I) would profit from practicing them.

Despite the diversity of approaches and information in these four selections, there are several features of communication about which the authors agree. The authors all identify the process of communication as ongoing and as a highly flexible and creative event, limited only by the imaginations of the participants. Also implicit in their writings is the notion that each communication event is "real" according to how the individual perceives that "reality." Reality is in the eyes of the perceiver, and communication is the process of sharing perceived realities that never can be identical. Confronting these multiple realities involves the skills of an effective communicator: be informed of the process of communication, its intricacies, and its problems; develop a strong desire to communicate effectively; identify the variety of communication experiences that can build communication effectiveness; and take every opportunity to practice the necessary skills.

Over the years many models of communication have been proposed as means of facilitating our understanding of the process of communication. In this essay, Gerald R. Miller discusses the functions that such models serve, specifying three as most important: the organizational function, the heuristic function, and the anticipatory function. As Miller notes, however, ". . . any intellectual device may be misused almost as readily as it may be used to advantage." In the second half of this essay, Miller identifies three common limitations of models: premature closure, symbol-behavior confusion, and oversimplification.

# 1

# Models and Speech Communication

## Gerald R. Miller

### The Nature of Models

. . . The complexity of speech communication requires that potentially relevant variables be isolated, or abstracted, from the total process. In accomplishing this task, models of speech communication may be of invaluable assistance. What functions are served by such models? Of equal importance, what are their limitations as aids in studying and understanding speech communication? . . .

Frequently, one thinks of a model as a miniature replica of some larger object or set of objects: an airplane, a gasoline engine, a frontier fort. No doubt this meaning stems from the experience that most of us have had with such models. Furthermore, one often thinks of models not only as replicas but as *identical* replicas of the original. For instance, modern hobby kits contain models of gasoline engines that are part by part identical with the original; such models differ only in size, not in detail.

At least two reasons may be cited why a model of speech communication cannot be viewed as an identical replica of the process itself. First, speech communication is a psychological phenomenon rather than a physical entity. Whereas it is relatively easy to produce physical representations of the parts of a gasoline engine or of an airplane, it is impossible to provide literal analogues for the many overt behaviors and internal responses present in any communicative situation. As a result, a model of speech communication is always symbolic; i.e., it employs words, numbers, or pictures, rather than physical representations, to depict potentially relevant aspects of the process.

Second, the very nature of process also prevents one from viewing a model of speech communication as an identical replica. As has been repeatedly implied, any model of speech communication must, of necessity, focus on only part of the total process. Because it is impossible to construct a model containing all the variables at work in the process, the model builder must make a conscious selection of the variables that he will include.

Even when it is asserted that a model of speech communication is symbolic, a wide range of possibilities is embraced. Verbal and mathematical models vary tremendously in their sophistication, with these variations depending largely upon how much is known about the particular phenomenon dealt with in the model. In some areas, models function as fully developed and formalized theories from which a number of specific outcomes may be deduced; in fact, certain authors have chosen to view the terms *model* and *theory* as synonymous.[1] Kaplan, however, points out that such usage may not be entirely justified.[2] His concern stems from the belief that only certain types of theories should be labeled as models, but it may, on the contrary, be suggested that many representations that are called models do not meet the tests of a coherent scientific theory. In a sense, such models are little more than useful visual aids.

Given these two extremes, a developed, formalized theory and a visual aid, most models of speech communication probably fall closer to the latter extreme than to the former. Even so, such models serve a useful purpose. *Specifically, let us think of a model of the speech communication process as a kind of classificatory system that enables one to abstract and to categorize potentially relevant parts of the process.*

Several considerations are implied by this statement. First, because numerous category systems are readily available, the schema employed will be determined by the purpose and interests of the model builder. It is useful to think of models as arbitrary constructs, as judgments made by the person who creates the model. By adopting this view, one avoids the pitfall of assuming that there is a *correct* model of speech communication; one common meaning for the term *model*, i.e., "something eminently worthy of imitation, an exemplar or ideal," is discarded. Certainly, no present model of speech communication is worthy of such lofty praise.

Second, however, the arbitrary nature of models does not make each one equally valuable. Returning to our stated conception of a model of speech communication, the phrases "classificatory system" and "potentially relevant parts" imply that criteria exist for evaluating a model. The most general criterion is the model's utility. Obviously, some classificatory systems result in more useful categories than others; they allow for greater success in identifying relevant aspects of the process. Moreover, a model ought to help in our long-range quest for process knowledge: it imposes closure on the system, provides a tentative list of potentially relevant variables, and suggests lawlike relationships among these variables. These points will be considered more fully later in the chapter, when we examine several models that are relevant for students of speech communication.

[1]See, for example, Herbert A. Simon and Allen Newell, "Models: Their Uses and Limitations," in *Current Perspectives in Social Psychology,* eds. Edwin P. Hollander and Raymond G. Hunt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 79 – 91.

[2]Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1964), p. 263.

## The Functions of Models

At their present level of development, most models of the speech communication process serve three major functions: an organizational, or communicative, function; a heuristic, or research-generating, function; and an anticipatory, or predictive, function. Each of these functions is of importance to students of speech communication, and we will consider them in greater detail.

### The Organizational Function

. . . A process-oriented individual asserts that speech communication is dynamic, ongoing, and ever changing. Once he has made this assertion, however, he has little else to say. As a result of this impasse, it is necessary to provide some organizational framework for talking about the process. A model provides this framework. It enables one to isolate certain relevant dimensions of the process (e.g., a source, a message, and an audience) and to communicate with others about them. Furthermore, such an analysis may be extended by identifying some of the relevant variables associated with sources, messages, and audiences (e.g., a source's attitudes, his knowledge, his speaking skill). Even though such an undertaking does not capture the entire richness of the process, it is essential to effective communication among students. A model provides the vehicle for this communication.

### The Heuristic Function

A model also serves a heuristic, or research-generating, function. As pointed out earlier, students of speech communication constantly seek to expand the existing frontiers of knowledge, to gain new insights into the complex psychological process that they are studying. But where does one begin this quest for knowledge? Which variables are to be investigated, and which are to be, at least temporarily, ignored? In order for research to be optimally fruitful, the student must come to grips with the preceding questions. In so doing, a model may be of invaluable assistance. Kaplan asserts:

> As inquiry proceeds, theories must be brought out into the open sooner or later; the model simply makes it sooner. In the Socratic metaphor, all thought is the conversation of the soul with itself. The creative imagination, in both scientist and artist, takes the form of a vigorous discussion with the boys in the back room; and there inevitably comes a time when someone says, "Put up or shut up!" It is at this moment that models are brought forward.[3]

Though most models of speech communication are not full-blown, coherent theories, they do represent an intellectual attempt to "put up or shut up!" That is, they reflect the model builder's thoughts regarding the relevant variables of the process. These variables will receive priority in study and research.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 269.

The research-generating function of a model may be easily illustrated. The figure below contains an abbreviated, simple model of the speech communication process. The three major elements of the model are a speaker, a listener, and feedback.[4] The model includes two potentially relevant speaker variables ("attitudes" and "encoding[5] skills"), two listener variables ("attitudes" and "decoding[6] skills"), and two values of the feedback variable ("positive" and "negative"). Let us consider a few of the many research questions, or hypotheses, suggested by this simple model.



SPEAKER
Attitudes
Encoding Skills

LISTENER
Attitudes
Decoding Skills

FEEDBACK
Positive
Negative
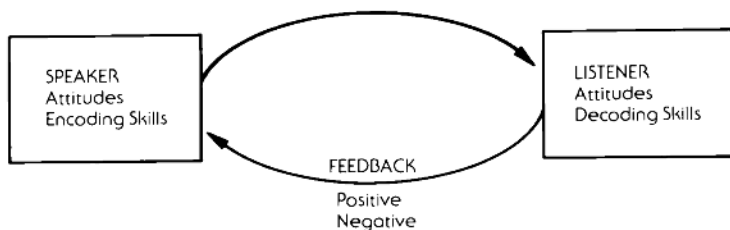
A Simple Model of the Speech Communication Process

For instance, a researcher might hypothesize that the speaker's encoding skills will influence the listener's attitudes toward the speaker and toward the proposition that the speaker advocates. Specifically, the researcher might choose to study the encoding variable "number of mispronunciations." If he approaches the problem experimentally, this dimension of encoding skills becomes the *independent* variable (i.e., the variable that the researcher systematically manipulates), while the listener variables "attitude toward speaker" (perceived source credibility) and "attitude toward proposition" become the *dependent* variables (i.e., the variables that the researcher measures). The hypothesis of interest might then be stated as follows: as the number of mispronunciations presented by a speaker increases, listener attitudes toward the speaker and toward the proposition he advocates will become less favorable. To the extent that

[4]Feedback: Those overt responses of a listener that serve to shape and to modify the succeeding communication behavior of a speaker. . . . Those responses that are likely to be perceived as rewarding (applause, nods of agreement, apparent close attention to the message, and so forth) are called *positive feedback*, whereas those responses likely to be perceived as punishing (boos and catcalls, inattention, yawns, frowns and so forth) are called *negative feedback*.

[5]Encode: Those psychological activities by which a speaker, or any source of a communication, translates his internal responses (thoughts, ideas, cognitions) into observable verbal, vocal, and physical stimuli (messages).

[6]Decode: Those psychological activities by which a listener, or any receiver of a communication, translates the observable verbal, vocal, and physical stimuli of a speaker into internal responses. Usually, although not always, these internal responses result in some subsequent overt behavior.

this hypothesis is confirmed, the researcher will have discovered a crude law pertaining to the speech communication process.

Numerous other research hypotheses may be generated from the model. Without going into great detail, let us suggest some of them:

1. As listener attitudes toward the speaker become less favorable, a greater quantity of negative feedback will occur.
2. The kind of feedback that a speaker receives will subsequently affect his attitudes and his encoding behaviors.
3. If feedback is predominantly negative, the speaker will manifest a less favorable attitude toward the proposition he advocates; if it is predominantly positive, the converse will occur.
4. Positive feedback will facilitate encoding behavior and negative feedback will have a disruptive effect on this variable.[7]
5. The more similar the initial attitudes of the speaker and the listener toward the proposition advocated, the greater the amount of positive feedback.

These and many other research hypotheses indicate potentially fruitful avenues for investigation.

At this point, it should be emphasized that a model is not a necessary condition for arriving at the preceding hypotheses; each of them could be derived without recourse to the model found in the figure. But it is readily apparent that the model provides a classificatory system for organizing and integrating variables and for making explicit what was formerly implicit. Also, by omission, the model helps to identify those variables that should *not* be studied. To use a facetious example, it indicates to the researcher that, for the time being, the variable "number of leprechauns dancing on the speaker's head" should be ignored. Given certain conditions, however, this negative function may become a disadvantage of a model rather than an advantage. These conditions will be discussed in the section, "Some Potential Shortcomings of Models."

All interested students of speech communication are not practicing researchers; instead, many find that questions involving practical communication strategies are of primary interest. What is the best way to encode *this* speech for *this* audience? How can I enhance my credibility with *this* listener, thus increasing the probability of effective communication? How should I respond to *this* particular instance of audience feedback? Each time these questions arise, the communicator will not

[7]Several studies have demonstrated the existence of this disruptive effect. See John W. Vlandis, "Variations in the Verbal Behavior of a Speaker as a Function of Varied Reinforcing Conditions," *Speech Monographs*, XXXI (June 1964), 116 – 120; Gerald R. Miller et al., "The Effect of Differential Reward on Speech Patterns," *Speech Monographs*, XXVIII (March 1961), 9 – 16; and Gerald R. Miller, "Variations in the Verbal Behavior of a Second Speaker as a Function of Varying Audience Responses," *Speech Monographs*, XXXI (June 1964), 109 – 115. For a review of this literature see David C. Murray, "Talk, Silence, and Anxiety," *Psychological Bulletin*, LXXV (April 1971), 244 – 260.

have the time nor the opportunity to conduct a controlled experiment; rather, he will be forced to make predictions on the basis of the best evidence available.

### The Anticipatory Function

It is in the realm of practical strategy that the third function of models of speech communication, the anticipatory, or predictive, function is of primary significance. Let us take the hypothetical example of your speech to the PTA group. . . . You have just hung up the phone after telling the PTA president that you would speak in favor of the bond proposal the next evening. Because you are a conscientious communicator and are deeply committed to passage of the proposal, you wish to do everything in your power to ensure that your speech will have maximum audience effect. How can you best accomplish this objective?

Obviously, you will begin to make predictions about the probable characteristics of the environment in which your communication will take place. You will analyze the situation, attempting to identify as many factors as possible that will influence your success. Once again, the classificatory system reflected in a model may assist you greatly. The model serves as a sort of anticipation system; i.e., it helps you to make educated guesses about those factors upon which your success or failure will hinge. Using the simple model in the figure as a reference point, you conclude that you must analyze carefully your listeners' probable initial attitudes toward you and toward the school bond proposal. If their probable attitudes are negative, you must make predictions about the kinds of encoding strategies that are likely to result in favorable changes. You must make judgments about the probable decoding skills of audience members, and you must seek to construct a message in harmony with these abilities. You must remind yourself of the importance of feedback; furthermore, you must make predictions about the kinds of feedback you are likely to receive, and you must consider ways of adjusting your communication behavior to accommodate the predicted responses. In short, you employ the model as a tool to analyze the situation and to arrive at predictions concerning it.

You could have undertaken this task without depending upon a model of speech communication, but you would probably have been less successful. In a sense, a model serves the same purpose as the conclusion of a syllogism; it explicitly sets forth previously implicit factors and relationships. The importance of this purpose should not be underestimated. The human mind does not function with the speed of an electronic computer; it often fails to grasp implications that are not carefully spelled out. To the extent that a model provides a useful, explicit set of categories for arriving at predictions of communication outcomes, it is indispensable to both the speech communication researcher and to the practical communication strategist.

### A Note of Caution

Although we have discussed three functions of models of speech communication, a final note of caution is in order. These functions do not exist as discrete categories; they are closely related. Organization and communication are essential to the effective conduct of research and to the development of predictions concerning probable communication outcomes. The researcher's hypothesis is a prediction, or an anticipation statement, in much the same sense that your educated guesses concerning the probable responses of a particular group of PTA members are predictions. Communication, organization, investigation, prediction, and understanding—all are intimately joined together and all are enhanced by the use of a model of the speech communication process. . . .

## Some Potential Shortcomings of Models

Thus far, we have stressed that models may be of invaluable assistance to the student of speech communication. This endorsement should now be tempered. The most useful tool may be treated shoddily, and any intellectual device may be misused almost as readily as it may be used to advantage. What are some of the potential shortcomings of models of speech communication? Specifically, this section will consider three intimately related shortcomings: premature closure, symbol-behavior confusion, and oversimplification.[8]

### Premature Closure

You will recall that one of the essential conditions for the acquisition of process knowledge is closure of the system, i.e., the ability to prevent the intrusion of potentially relevant variables into the system. In a sense, a model imposes intellectual closure on the system because it stipulates the variables that are to be studied and those that are to be ignored. As previously emphasized, the very nature of a model makes this restriction both necessary and desirable; but under certain circumstances, closure may be a detriment rather than an asset. This is particularly true in an area such as speech communication, where so little is yet known about the subject matter.

Consider again the simple model introduced at the beginning . . . (the figure), a model having as its major elements, speaker, listener, and feedback. You will recall that two speaker variables, "attitudes" and "encoding skills," and two listener variables, "attitudes" and "decoding skills," are found in the model. Assume that research based on this model uncovers some simple relationship, e.g., that a listener whose attitudes toward the topic are similar to those of the speaker will learn more message content than a listener whose attitudes toward the topic vary

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[8]A more extensive list of shortcomings, along with a more extensive discussion of each, may be found in Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, pp. 275 – 288.