

**INTERROGATING COMMUNICATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION
ON WORDS, MEANING AND INTENTION**

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Abstract

Communication is a necessary part of our daily interactions. It is the means through which we share understanding, our thought-content with others. As such, the effectiveness or otherwise of communication depends on the correspondence of thoughts, ideas or knowledge between a sender and recipient. The purpose of communication, then, is to achieve a shared understanding in terms of meaning, the relation between form and content, and the association of thought and perception. How to achieve this in everyday communicative discourse is the challenge interrogated by this study. Given the depth of this challenge a philosophical input is central for an adequate interrogation. For this reason the study employs analytical and interdisciplinary methods. Philosophical analysis is adopted to interrogate the means through which shared understanding is achieved in communication. Means of communication here refer to words, meaning and intention. The interdisciplinary stance of the work derives from its ability to bring together communication and philosophy. The paper finds that words that should reveal meanings and intentions in most cases do not do so. This mismatch which may appear as a mere communication lapse is more profound. It is located at the core of effective communication and its philosophical implications. By drawing attention to this, the study underscores not just the academic relevance of this problem but its practical implications, given the potential of language to foster understanding, build and sustain positive public sphere values which are the hall marks of a healthy democracy.

Keywords: Communication, Philosophy, Words, Meaning, Intention

Introduction: What is Communication?

The central importance of communication to our daily interactions entails that every effort should be dedicated towards gaining an understanding of it as far as humans can achieve it. It is the means through which we share understanding, our thought-content with others. The conventional transmission model of communication involves the sender, message, channel, receiver (SMCR). That is, communication typically involves the process of a sender sending idea, message in form of symbols which can be in words, gestures to a receiver who decodes these and reflect them back through feedback. Nordquist (2019) defines communication as ‘the creation and exchange of meaning.’ In a case where the sender is able to get across to the receiver as intended through having his thoughts, ideas or knowledge understood then communication is said to be effective. Conversely, in a situation where the sender and the receiver operate at different levels of meaning, communication is said to be ineffective. Communication is so central to human affairs that in a situation where it is not well managed there will be crises whether in social relationship, business relationship or even the relationship between the government and the citizens and government of one country and another country. In Public relations, for example, internal communication is regarded as a special area due to its strategic importance in helping organisations to know how best to build ‘two-way, trusting relationships with internal publics, with the goal of improving organisational effectiveness’ (Yeomans 2009:318).

The purpose of communication, then, is to achieve a shared understanding in terms of meaning, the relation between form and content, and the association of thought and perception. How to achieve this in everyday communicative discourse is the challenge interrogated by this study. Given the encompassing scope of communication, it is not possible to go into the intricacies of its various aspects in a paper of this nature. Instead the study is limited to the examination of communication as it concerns words, meaning and intention to see the extent they correspond with each other in daily communicative discourse. Even in concentrating on these three areas of communication, it is important to note that it is impossible to do justice to them in one paper. What this study aims to do then, is present an idea of the scope of the difficulty involved in the act of getting words, meaning and intention to correlate for the reader to probe further.

Brief on Words

Although *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (1999) gives numerous definitions of 'word', they can conveniently be placed in five categories: word defines the smallest unit of spoken or written language that can be used independently; word is a brief conversation on a particular matter; it is any brief statement, message or communication; it is also what someone says or said; and, importantly, it functions as language as a means of communication. What is evident from the various explanations is that meaning is conveyed through word or a group of words. Experience, however, can infuse a word(s) with other meanings thereby rendering the dictionary meaning if not inconsequential at least substantially weakened. According to Beaty, Booth, Hunter and Mays (2002:928) 'words...are more than hard blocks of meaning on whose sense everyone agrees. They also have a more personal side, and they carry emotional force and shades of suggestion.' For Hodges (2001:4) 'two people can write down the same sentence and mean entirely different things by it.' Bosmajian (1990:196) calls attention to the ability of words 'to justify the unjustifiable, to make palatable the unpalatable, to make reasonable the unreasonable, to make decent the indecent.' He notes that Hitler's 'Final solution' appeared reasonable once the Jews were successfully labelled by the Nazis as sub-humans, as 'parasites', 'vermin' and 'bacilli.' For Naylor (1990:198) 'words are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.' What these bring out, suggestively, at least, is that there are no means of evaluating words or languages in point of accuracy of representation, truth or logical rigour. For this reason, while this study recognises that word(s) is the core element that holds the key to meaning in communication, it is, nonetheless, aware of the need to interrogate the extent 'word' fulfils this condition, the possible obstacles preventing the realisation of this objective and how best to close this gap.

Understanding Meaning

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014) outlined four ways of understanding 'meaning.' The first is of a word/sign etc. This refers to 'the thing or idea that a word, expression, or sign represents.' The second is of ideas in speech/book etc. This has to do with 'the thoughts or ideas that someone wants you to understand from what they say, do, write etc.' The third is of purpose/special quality. This deals with 'the quality that makes life, work, etc seem to have a purpose or value.' The fourth sense of understanding meaning points to the 'the true nature and importance of something.' While this study identifies more with the second aspect of meaning it goes further to acknowledge an essential element binding all of them. This is that meaning provides the guide to shared understanding in communication.

Conceptualising Intention

According to *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (1999), intention is ‘something that someone plans or intends to do; an aim or purpose.’ *Chambers English Dictionary* (1990) defines it as ‘application of thought to an object.’ Equally, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014) defines it as ‘a plan or desire to do something.’ The imports of these for the study are two-fold. One, is that while intention can be conveyed through words they are primarily mind-based. As such there is no way to categorically claim that a word(s) that express intention actually represents it. For instance, when King Herod asks the Three Wise Men to report back to him if they succeed in finding Baby Jesus so that he too can go and pay Him homage; his words and his intention were the opposite of each other. Two, the problem of words misrepresenting intention is not limited to verbal communication. It is to be found in every aspect of communication. Body language, sign language, among others, all struggle for the correct interpretation that represents the act. Shakespeare (1973: 162-163) captures the difficulty between body language and accurate interpretation when King Duncan lamenting the betrayal of the thane of Cawdor in *Macbeth* states that ‘There’s no art/ To find the minds construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built/ An absolute trust.’ To further underscore the seriousness of this problem, Macbeth who displayed *absolute* loyalty to Duncan and whom Duncan transferred his trust and elevated to the rank of thane of Cawdor turns to be even more treacherous than his predecessor. To demonstrate his trust and deepen his social relationship with Macbeth, Duncan decides to spend the night in Macbeth’s home: ‘From hence to Inverness/ And bind us further to you’ (163). Macbeth murders Duncan that night. The difficulty between body language and accurate interpretation is a problem that spans every aspect of communication and strikes at the core of shared meaning and what this represents and, even, the implication of this for social relationship. Even in Peace and Conflict resolution it may mean that what is said and accepted may not be as important as what is not said and not accepted. For instance, neurotic bargaining involve what is said and accepted whereas what is acted upon is what is unstated and unaccepted. Explaining neurotic bargaining Isaak (1975:170) submits that its essence is to ‘persuade your opponent that you will do one thing and then surprise him by doing the opposite. The method is effective precisely because the reversal seems so risky and inconsistent that your opponent cannot believe any sane person would do it.’ The poet Nturu (1975:169) alludes to this when he writes that ‘Peace resides in the hearts of men/ Not in conference tables and delegates’ signatures.’ A good example is the Aburi Accord signed by Gowon and Ojukwu in an effort to forestall the Nigeria-Biafra war. For scholars such as Achebe (2012); Ezeani (2013); Gould (2013); and Soyinka (2009)

Gowon's renegeing on the Aburi Accord was a significant factor that led to the war. Intention, then, poses a special dilemma for communication because it is mind-based.

Analysis: Interrogating Communication

From the brief discussion on word, meaning and intention, it is safe to state that they form the tripod on which communication rests. As such whenever there is a mismatch among them communication is distorted. The purpose of this study is to show that this mismatch which may appear as a mere communication lapse is more profound. It is located at the core of effective communication and its attainability or otherwise by humans. Given the depth of the predicament a philosophical input is central if an amicable solution is to be found. This will make it possible to provide a framework that enables us to understand the extent of the problem and how best to make sense of everyday communication. The predicament exposes, at least, six serious issues.

The first of these is the hidden intention of the communicator. A communicator can use words that address the situation at hand in a way that the recipient is lured into a false sense of shared meaning and concern while in an actual fact the communicator is playing on the awareness of what the recipient wish to hear. Macbeth's reply to King Duncan on the praise he received from him for his valour in war could be seen as an example of this. Macbeth with an eye to Duncan's throne based on the prophesy of the Three Witches and the plot to murder Duncan on his mind tells Duncan: 'Your Highness' part/ Is to receive our duties; and our duties/ Are to your throne and state, children and servants,/ which do but what they should, by doing everything/ safe toward your love and honor' (Shakespeare 1973:163). This calls attention to the need for the receiver to be aware of how words can be used to direct attention to an obvious meaning and its inability to expose the latent meaning. Such subversive communication critically undermines the trust needed to build and sustain a healthy public sphere. The challenge is how to ensure that inter-subjective understandings that ought to be a natural attribute of the public sphere is not replaced with inter-subjective misunderstandings which in turn will prevent a healthy critique of social norms and any hope of reforming society through social means. Without this the potential of language to foster understanding and build and sustain positive public sphere values come under heavy question mark. In this wise using language to frame problems instead of being an aid to the search for solutions becomes the main problem. The challenge is how to unveil the implicit meaning that is embodied even though unstated as against the dominant meaning that is proposed.

The second challenge is that words may have a deeper meaning than even the speaker is aware of. This can happen in many ways. One, a speaker may fall prey to the dangers of taking dictionary definitions uncritically as well as not knowing the vital difference between denotation and connotation. Beaty, Booth, Hunter and Mays (2002:928) submit that the 'words we use indicate not only what we mean but how we feel about it' and also that what 'words connote can be just as important ...as what they denote...' For Altick (1976:147) sensitivity to connotation is needed for us to understand what is said which may be quite plain, and what is suggested 'which may actually be far more important than the superficial meaning.' Further he states that 'the connotations that surround most of the words in our vocabulary are...a complex and intimate record of our life. Our present reaction to a word may be the cumulative result of all our experiences with the word and its referent' (149). If the words are treated as embodying different connotations, it then becomes unclear as what exact meaning is intended or how we can be sure of what intention fits a particular word. Alice's question in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* is at the heart of the matter. The question according to Alice is whether you can make words mean so many different things. Even if this could be done there is the further issue of how to condition people to accept it or if not accept it, at least, not protest it. The problem comes back to how to get words to tell us what is really happening. Two, a speaker can have a meaning he cannot express. This is, perhaps, best represented by Wittgenstein's celebrated passage at the end of the *Tractatus* in which he counsels that what we cannot speak about we should pass over in silence. Three, a speaker can inadvertently say something else. A speaker who is aware of such slip of the tongue may correct it but the one who is unaware and the recipient is not in a position to detect it will be left with a different meaning from that intended by the speaker. This way both will be left with different meanings while thinking they have a shared meaning. Four, a speaker can express a meaning which he has not taken time to investigate its accuracy. After the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth confidently assures Macbeth that 'A little water clears us of this deed' (Shakespeare 1973:174). Subsequent events, Macbeth's loss of peace of mind and Lady Macbeth's mental disease which eventually claimed her life, showed how little she knew about the relationship between psychology, mental health and a horrific crime such as murder. Five and lastly, a speaker can say something he is not interested in. At the height of South African apartheid, to mask its interest in the apartheid regime and its unwillingness to support the black liberation efforts, the American government stated that they are adopting the policy of constructive engagement. Curry (2013) quotes Desmond Tutu as describing constructive engagement as 'an abomination' that was 'immoral, evil and totally un-Christian.' Indeed Amy Goodman according to Curry notes that 'the U.S. devoted more resources to finding Mandela to hand over to the apartheid forces than the apartheid

forces themselves.’ Curry dismisses constructive engagement as ‘neither constructive nor engaging.’

The third challenge is that a word may acquire a greater significance as it is being uttered. Here the meaning is located in the context of an evolving situation that denies its full import to both the speaker and the receiver. In acting the outraged host after he had murdered Duncan in his house, Macbeth tells his audience: ‘Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had lived a blessed time...’ (Shakespeare 1973:177). Even though Macbeth made the speech to cover his guilt, it proved to be prophetic as subsequent events showed that from the death of Duncan till Macbeth himself was killed he never again experienced peace of mind.

The fourth challenge is for a word to have a greater meaning than even the speaker can articulate. In such situation the recipient is already barred from having a comprehensive meaning since the speaker does not even know what the word entails. Plato’s ‘Form’ and Kant’s ‘Noumena’ represent words that are larger than what both the speaker and the recipient can understand. For Plato (1941) there is the world of appearance and the world of form. The world of appearance is the visible world we see and this is the only world humans can understand. However, true knowledge cannot come from this world because it is an imitation of the real which is the form. The form is the world of eternal essences and resides outside human understanding. Likewise Kant (1968) submits that reality can be divided into the world as we experience it – the phenomenal and the thing-in-itself or noumenon. For him, all that we can ever know is the phenomenal; the noumenon is outside what humans’ can know. In this wise both Plato’s form and Kant’s noumena do not add to knowledge but instead point to its limits. How can a recipient decode a message in which the speaker does not know the full meaning of his/her utterances? Like Plato and Kant, such communication will face the problem of a speaker proposing something and at the same time denying it in which case nothing is achieved. In making the form and the noumena unreachable goals, Plato and Kant ended up separating experience and reason and distorting the possibility of effective communication between them. It is here, in the attempt to reconcile these sharply opposing view-points, that the challenge lies: how to assess the accuracy of representation in language, how to know the truth, how to be sure of the equality of words to things. In Socrates’ entire search for the truth, he refrained from stating it, rather his attempts were to guide humans to the rigorous nature of its acquisition; to point to its possibility and, perhaps, impossibility.

The fifth challenge is how to avoid the dilemma of being caught in a hall of mirrors. This involves wishing on the one hand that words should match intention, to cast light

on the importance of communication to guide all facets of human endeavour, and at the same time recognising that the agreement of words to meaning is in most senses impossible. 'In most senses' because to say that it is an impossibility will be to assign communication to a realm where words will become meaningless and by extension render all human activities inconsequential. The consequence of such a price will be philosophically illogical and self-defeatist. This, however, does not foreclose the philosophical relevance of the dilemma which underlies every communication: the possibility that words and intention may, in most cases always, differ. It is this position that needs to be explicitly stated. The failure of words to match intention helps to highlight both what communication is and what it is not. However, if this failure is all there is to it, then it is of little real value. What is cardinal is that it provides a position of knowledge from which to access the world knowing that the possibility of disparity between words and intention exist. It is this move that makes it possible to reconcile words and intention in a way that allows for meaningful interaction. As such even though words may not match intentions, and even though in some cases there may be a deliberate attempt on the part of the message initiator to double-cross the recipient, calling attention to these lapses is valuable and crucial to the extent that effective communication is often interpreted as the ability of the recipient to correctly decipher the message of the sender when meaning is taken to reside in the words and not in the unstated intention.

The sixth challenge is how to determine the meaning of words that are by their nature slippery and vague. Jackson and Amvela (2000) submit that there is ambiguity in the notion of word. For them 'No matter how careful we are in our definition of the word, we are bound to accommodate a certain amount of vagueness or ambiguity, which is inherently in the very nature of language in general and that of the word in particular' (52). Orwell (1976:519) equally insists that there are some words that by their nature are often used in a consciously dishonest way. He gives examples of such words as socialism, democracy, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice. For him, 'the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different.' The problem is that the recipient may not be aware of this. Eckhardt, Holahan and Stewart (1976:136) cite John Locke as noting that:

vague and insignificant forms of speech, and abuse of language, have so long passed for mysterious of science; and hard or misapplied words with little or no meaning have, by prescription, such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them, that they are but the covers of ignorance and hindrance of true knowledge.

Logicians (Copi 1978, Ucheaga 2001) identify such reasoning errors or mistakes as constituting what are termed as fallacies. For instance the fallacies of ambiguity have to do with a word or term used in more than one meaning in a presentation. Ullmann (1962) in his book *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* identifies the most important sources of ambiguity as: the generic character of the word, the multiplicity of aspects in every word, the lack of clear-cut boundaries in the non-linguistic world, and the lack of familiarity with the referent of the words (cited in Jackson and Amvela 2000:52). Even inferences ‘may be carelessly or carefully made’ (Hayakawa 1976:138). An inference ‘consists of drawing a conclusion from evidence, of arriving at certain opinions or beliefs on the basis of others’ (Oyeshile and Ugwuanyi 2006:129). However, one may infer ‘on the basis of a broad background of previous experience with the subject matter, or no experience at all’ (Hayakawa 1976:138). The most crucial question is ‘whether or not we are aware of the inferences we make’ (Hayakawa 1978:139). What comes across very clearly is that both fallacies and inferences act as means of unpacking the complexities of language, meaning and intention associated with the vague and slippery nature of words. One way to address this is to ‘insist on conceptual clarification and definition of key terms’ (Okolo 2015:61). Also Frege’s admonition that we must not make the mistake of asking for the meaning of a word in isolation must be taken seriously. For Frege it is ‘only in the context of a sentence does a word have meaning’ (Dummett 1989:114).

What calls attention sharply from this analysis are, at least, two. First, is that words do not always convey the intended meaning and that this has philosophical implications for effective communication. The second connects with the first: drawing attention to philosophical implications is not an academic exercise without practical implications. The potential of language to foster understanding and build and sustain positive public sphere values are the hall marks of a healthy democracy. Howard (2012:ix) reminds that ‘language is the only true democracy.’ In a situation where words, meaning and intention are a mismatch, communication as already stated will become subversive which will critically undermine the trust needed to build, nurture, protect and sustain a healthy democratic environment and public sphere. Indeed, Christopher N. Candlin, in a preface he wrote in Celia Roberts, Evelyn Davies and Tom Jupp’s (1992:ix) book, observes that ‘one key obstacle to the development of contemporary society is not resources or infrastructure but human interaction and communication.’

Conclusion

The study sets out to interrogate communication through a philosophical examination of words, meaning and intention. Discussion revealed that once a thoroughgoing rigour is

employed, the difficulty of knowing when words match meaning and intention is forced into full view. The question of understanding what is presented but not what is intended is not a matter that can be ignored for it is at the core of effective communication. More importantly, it has serious philosophical implication. By drawing attention to this, the study underscores both the academic relevance of the issue and its practical dimension given the potential of language to foster understanding and build and sustain positive public sphere values which are the hall marks of a healthy democracy.

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