



Be Relevant to Intercultural Diversity
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Lifelong
Learning



Our Communication Concept

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Interpersonal communication and intercultural communication¹

Our perspective on communication is a complex concept that implies a comprehensive socio-linguistic and pragmalinguistic competence. Knowing how to communicate does not only mean knowing how to use linguistic tools (vocabulary, syntax, morphology, phonetics, specialised terminology, etc) in one's own or another's community; but also being able to use the linguistic tools in a way that is suitable to social and situational contexts, and therefore, in relation to the interlocutor, the places, the aims, the intentions that one wants to convey. Furthermore, the concept of communication is rather wide and comprises varied fields: from verbal communication (words and, generally, linguistic heritage) to visual communication (images, forms, colours), from oral verbal communication to written verbal communication, from paraverbal (voice) communication to nonverbal communication (body language). Communication is therefore the basis and medium of every social event: social processes are not possible without communication. Communication is a multilateral process and, consequently, it is extremely sensitive to interferences; the result of which is the fruit of everybody's participation. It is, therefore, an interactive practice whose repercussions are of fundamental importance in professional and institutional life.²

In this paper we focus especially on oral communication because it is central in any encounter between adults-in-mobility and adults-professionally-in-contact-with-mobility; furthermore, it is the way of communication adults-in-mobility mainly practice. However, misunderstanding can also appear in written communication, and since the adults-in-mobility have to rely on their own assumptions what the written text is about, this kind of communication can be even more problematic, so that the whole interaction can break down (cf. Klein/Caruana ed. 2008).

ADULT-IN-MOBILITY (AM)

Any individual, eighteen years of age or older, that for economic, social, professional or cultural reasons emigrates from his/her own country of origin and moves for a short or a long period of time in a different geographical, cultural and linguistic context. This different context very often implies, though not necessarily, a state different from the one of origin. (SPICES Guidelines 2007: 14)

ADULT-PROFESSIONALLY-IN-CONTACT-WITH-MOBILITY (or simply Adult-in-Contact-with-Mobility; ACM)

Any individual who for reasons of work or profession comes into contact with adults in mobility (for example: educators, trainers, teachers, intercultural mediators, front-line desk officers or counter personnel, doctors...) (SPICES Guidelines 2007: 14)

¹ This paper is an excerpt from the SPICES Guidelines (cf. Klein ed. 2007).

² We base our concept of verbal communication on works of the Bateson group, Erving Goffman, ethnographers like Jenny Cook-Gumperz and John J. Gumperz, Charles Goodwin, Frederick Erickson, Geoffrey Schulz, ethnomethodologists like Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff, Gail Jefferson.

Interpersonal communication

Communication in its totality is extremely vast and complex, and the fields of application are numerous; so much so that a manual such as the one we are presenting here, most certainly cannot cover the whole topic. This is not our objective. We intend to initiate a critical discourse on the one hand, and on the other, to sensitise people to those aspects of communication that may have immediate impact on relationships, ourselves and our everyday physical work environment. This is the indispensable basis for a critical comprehension of how interpersonal and intercultural communication works.

In our view, communication is an instrument which, if used carefully and consciously, may bring personal, relational, and organisational benefits. This does not mean, however, that communication automatically resolves all personal, interpersonal, or organisational problems. But it can undoubtedly help come to a resolution. In this sense, training in communication represents personal, professional and intercultural enrichment.

Communication is:

- the reciprocal exchange of messages between two (or more) individuals with respect to all the above mentioned means: words, voice, body, images
- the basis and the medium of every social event: without communication, social processes would not be possible
- a multilateral, and consequently, weak process because it is subject to barriers (misunderstandings, individual perspectives, stereotypes, socially and culturally bound ways of behaviour)
- powerful, because if managed properly, it can supersede its own weakness and find common solutions to problems
- a system that has extremely important repercussions at all levels of interpersonal, intercultural, private and professional relations.

What does communication signify?

- We want to maintain, defend, and reinforce our self-esteem.

Therefore, we need contact with others, which triggers off communication. An attack on an individual's self-esteem is reflected in the communication process.

**Communicating in the best of ways implies:
respecting our interlocutors' self-esteem.**

- What is true is not what I say but what my interlocutor understands. There is no guarantee that our interlocutor understands what we mean to say.

The usual reaction that threatens our self-esteem is defensiveness. It is not necessary that the other be attacked, but that the other feels attacked.

**Communicating in the best of ways signifies:
not reacting with a defensive manoeuvre
to our interlocutor's defensive manoeuvre.**

Means of communication

Each act of interpersonal communication can employ four types of communicative resources:

- verbal communication (linguistic patrimony)
- paraverbal communication (voice)
- nonverbal communication (body language)
- visual communication (colours, forms, images).

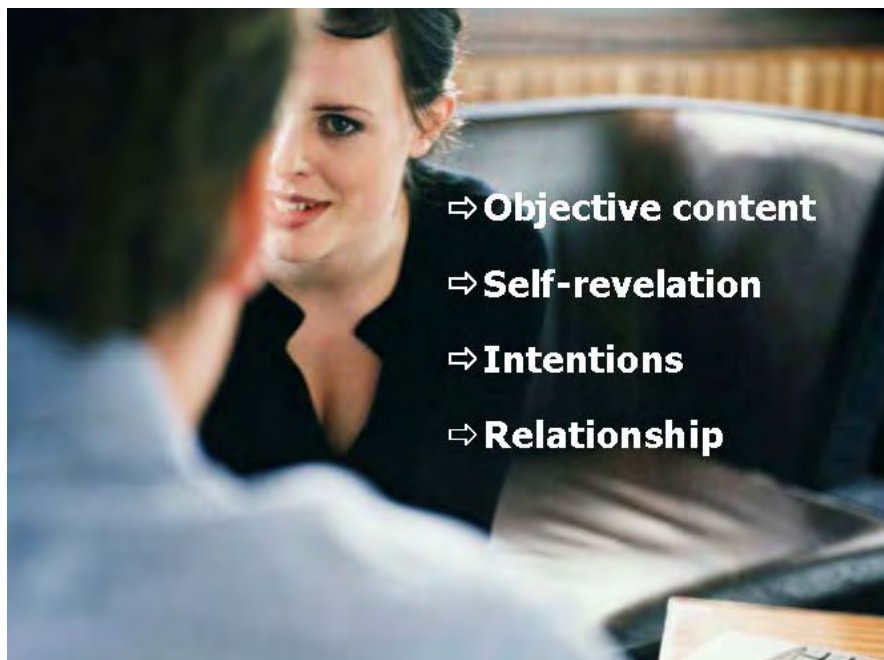
The four planes of communication

The message, and therefore also the communication, is situated on four planes³:

- **Objective content** is what the sender intends to communicate to the receiver.
- **Self-revelation** is the information that the sender reveals about him/herself.
- **Intentions** are the objectives the sender wants to obtain from the receiver.
- **Relationship**, the information about the relation between the sender and the receiver.

Each of these planes is present in every message, though the weight of the single components may vary. Single planes may be emphasised by the sender, or received by the receiver in an emphatic way. There is a link between the four planes of the message; each plane conditions the other three. Each of the four planes may represent a barrier that changes the efficiency of the message. We must, therefore, keep track of these four planes in every interpersonal communicative situation.

Good communication is oriented toward:
the situation
the interlocutor
the objective.



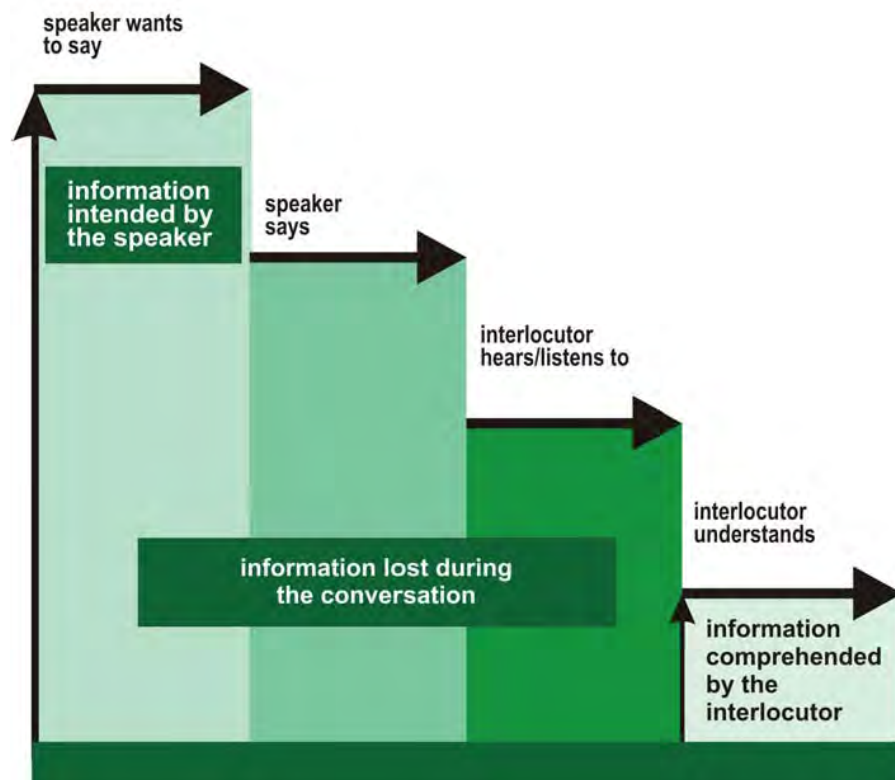
³ By "planes of communication" we are referring to Watzlawick/Beavin/Jackson 1967.

Barriers in communication

Barriers in communication occur when:

- the plane of the objective content is not clear
- interlocutors are not speaking about the same thing
- the written message is not (fully) understood
- communication partners do not have the same level of information
- misunderstandings happen on the plane of the relationship
- the two planes, that of the content and that of the relationship, are inverted
- the messages on the plane of the content are in contradiction with the messages on the plane of the relationship
- interlocutors' prejudices determine the dialogue
- only the information that confirms the prejudice is perceived
- interlocutors' values are challenged and feelings hurt
- communication partners' experiences and cultural backgrounds are noticeably different.

As speaker/writer, one must constantly make sure that his/her words are comprehended in the way they are intended, and at the same time, that partners in communication fully understand each other. One should ask her/himself what effects his/her behaviour is having on the interlocutor.



Verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal, visual communication

All our individual perceptions constitute messages that we elaborate at a conscious or unconscious level. In our encounters with others, the individual essentially perceives and transmits four types of messages.

- verbal messages
These are messages expressed in words. The words, the sentences and the construction of the whole discourse are relevant. Discourse may be spoken and also written.
- paraverbal messages
These refer to how words, sentences, and discourse are perceived through the interplay of pauses, volume, pitch registers, intonation contours, speed, stress, and rhythm.
- nonverbal messages
These involve visible behaviour, which transmits (un)intentional messages without words: the use of body language, facial expression, gesture, movement, posture, eye contact, and proximity.
- visual messages
These comprise colours, forms, and the symbols that our interlocutor wears or brings.

Any type of message, be it verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal, or visual, is perceived and interpreted by the other. Barriers in the communication process occur on the basis of the cultural and personal differences of the two interlocutors in:

1. perceiving and interpreting
2. verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal, or visual behaviour.

Interpersonal communication may simultaneously involve the four aspects of the message:

- verbal
- paraverbal
- nonverbal
- visual.

The message content and some mechanisms to ensure its understanding are transmitted through the spoken word and supported by all the other means of communication.

The subjective experience of interaction, feelings and behaviour, are signalled consciously or unconsciously through our voices, our bodies, through colours, forms, and symbols. The elements of paraverbal language are based on ourselves, in part on innate models, and in part on learned behaviour. The deepest meaning of any message depends on the following personal factors:

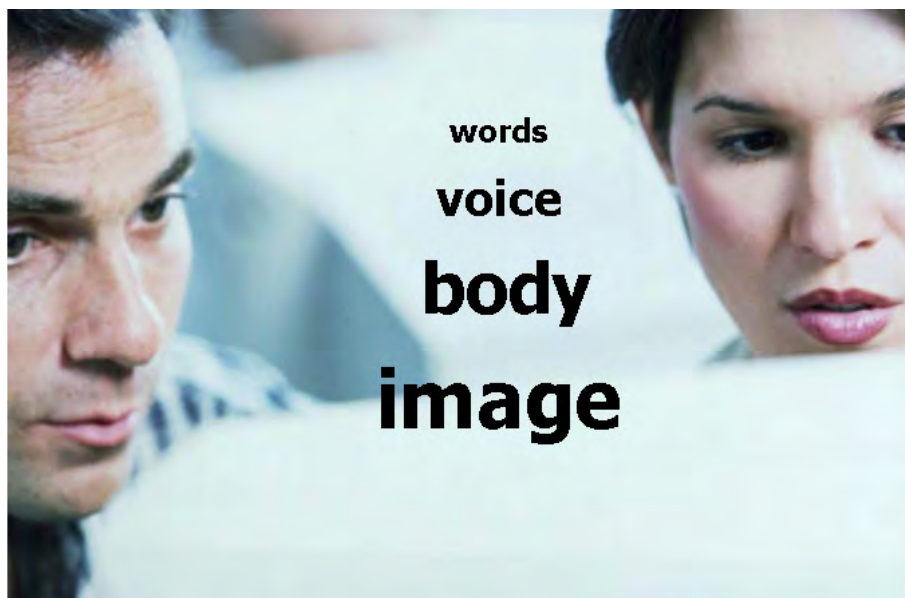
- social position
- communicative and social networking
- norms, beliefs, orientation, and the values of the socio-cultural world in which the subject acts each time
- subjective experience
- concrete situation.

Paraverbal, nonverbal, and visual signals may have different meanings. The meaning of the signals may be unequivocal or ambiguous.

The following list includes possible expressive elements of voice, body, and image.

Ways of speaking	Body behaviour
pauses volume pitch registers intonation contours speed stress rhythm	facial expressions gestures the direction of our eyes mouth and lip movement posture proximity the way of moving the body
Audible symbols	
laughing clearing one's throat sighing	weeping coughing yawning
Exterior appearance	
clothing: form and colour jewellery	hair style status symbols

Communicative components have different ways of affecting the message, in the following order of emotional impact:



Their effects can integrate,
reinforce, tone down or contradict each other.

Perception of the message

The receiver reacts to every message. This reaction (feedback) depends on different conditioning factors which are not always foreseen by the sender. The greater the cultural difference is, the less foreseeable the reaction.

Three processes determine the receiver's reaction:

- immediate perception of the facts
- interpretation
- feelings.

The receiver's feedback to the sender's message is a product of these three processes. While you are speaking with an individual, different factors come into play on both sides. Not only do you perceive what your interlocutor is saying (verbal), but also through the way in which it is voiced (paraverbal) and the body language (nonverbal), along with the perception of forms and colours (visual) used. Unconsciously the perceptions are confused, forming a certain impression. It often happens that we do not listen carefully to what the other is saying, but we observe the way in which it is being said. We attribute specific meaning to our perceptions. This interpretation may coincide with the communicative intentions of the sender. Perception and interpretation provoke feeling in the receiver.

Simultaneously participants in the communication are influenced by different factors:

- background knowledge
- socio-cultural context
- situational context
- conversational context.

Our knowledge about the communication itself, the outside world and its interplay between both, enables us to understand and explain the complex mechanisms of interpersonal and intercultural communication. Background awareness of the interacting agents is an essential part of the message, referring to extra-linguistic, situational, socio-cultural and sociolinguistic factors. Such knowledge acts as a resource from which the participants draw the necessary and relevant assumptions. Theoretically these assumptions constitute presuppositions that in turn guarantee the adequate interpretation of entire communicative discourse. The higher the degree of shared presuppositions on the part of those involved in the interaction, the more probable it is that communication succeeds; in other words, that the interlocutors understand each other. On the basis of the speaker's assumed presuppositions of what is necessary and sufficient, more or less conscious implications are activated. In effect not everything is verbalized explicitly. Moreover, what the receiver is to interpret - and therefore comprehend - is not always verbalized on the grounds of their shared presuppositions. The greater the cultural differences are, the less shared the presuppositions. This process, however, does not often happen in a conscious way. Furthermore, we cannot suppose that the receiver's interpretation always corresponds exactly with the implications actuated by the sender. This is precisely because the presuppositions are not always completely shared. One speaker may not realise how much is or is not being shared by other participants. The perception of a communicative event triggers feelings in the receiver, which in turn influences the process of interpretation.

Contexts and contextualisation

➤ the socio-cultural context

The socio-cultural context is the broader context in which the interaction takes place; i.e. the national, international, European, the work and institutional contexts, the contexts of one's private life etc. Context acts as a frame of reference for assumptions and implications, on one side, and the interpretation of the message on the other.

➤ the situational context

The situational context is the more narrow context established by the physical and social situation, by socially defined times and places, and related to participants' roles. A communicative situation has the aim to resolve recurring matters of social life. Social situations are pre-constructed in a larger socio-cultural context with regard to what types of situations really exist in a society and how they are initiated and performed. During the process of socialisation and inculturation, a member of a society learns the rules and habits which are necessary to perform the different situations of everyday life and in institutions. Further acculturation may enrich the understanding of new situations. Apart from socio-cultural and situational presuppositions there are always culturally defined expectations, beliefs, and individual assumptions, interests and motivations which all play an important part in a shared interpretation of an ongoing social event.

➤ the conversational context

In an even narrower sense, every speech act is situated in a conversational context. To take part in a conversation means therefore, to know who has the floor and which participants are the listeners. Knowledge of how turns of floor are routinely performed is necessary. Furthermore, every utterance is formulated on an implicit coherence to what is spoken before (by the same speaker or by an interlocutor) and has consequences which establish obligations on the side of the listener on how to continue the conversation coherently. The conversational context is neither static nor predefined. It is dynamically developed by the participants throughout the interaction. Signalling the different participation roles (speaker, listener, bystander) is culturally defined. So, a member of a culture entering a conversation within the frame of another culture may routinely apply his or her ways of signalling different participation roles and conversational activities as turn taking, changing the topic or entering into the final phase of an interaction.

Furthermore, there are culturally defined sequences of conversational activities. For instance, cultures differ in respect of how long one should extend small talk before coming to the main topic of an interaction.

Some situations are rigidly pre-established, but some are not. In the latter cases, participants have the possibility to redefine the situation. For example, if the static socio-cultural context is 'medicine', then the predefined situational context is 'the doctor's office'. This context may be modified through a process of negotiation between the participants in the situation. The roles could even be inverted.

➤ contextualisation cues

To give the listener hints to what we mean by what we are saying, we use "contextualisation cues". The means may be paraverbal and nonverbal signals, code-switching or laughing, or other. We can mean what we say in quite different ways: emphatically or ironically, jokingly or earnestly. In all these cases, we let the receiver know, by contextualisation cues, how the content of our utterances is to be interpreted. Also, contextualisation cues are different in different societies and cultures.⁴

⁴ In this respect we rely on the work of John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1982b).



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● **BARRIERS** ●

Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication is obviously based on the concept of interpersonal communication. It exists not only in the present society, but has always existed. It is a phenomenon linked to commerce, wars, migrations, and conquests (cf. Hinnenkamp 1994:1). In other terms, each time interlocutors from different cultures meet with their different mindsets and their different ways of communication, they are unavoidably involved in intercultural communication. Each interlocutor brings his/her own cultural background and experience and adapts them to the interactional dynamics.

Each communicative event is conditioned by the socio-cultural and experiential backgrounds of those involved. By culture we mean those "specific mindsets that are socially predetermined and through which individuals personally come in contact with in a historically determined context" (translation from Italian, Sepilli/Guaitini Abbozzo 1974:30). If such a background and the respective mindsets are not shared, misunderstandings can easily occur and negotiation of meaning is required to reach a common interpretation. Negotiation of meaning (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b) refers to the formulation of an expression or the symbolic meaning of an action. Thus, meaning is ultimately negotiated by all participants in a communicative event. The sharing and negotiation efforts represent a fundamental strategy in intercultural communication.

Even if communicatively different ways of behaviour do not necessarily cause immediate failure of communication, it can instil stereotypical perceptions. Developing intercultural communicative abilities does not only imply perceiving cultural differences in various communicative forms, but being able to communicate with people with culturally (and socially) different communicative habits. In brief, knowing how to sustain constructive and productive intercultural communication means being able to adequately communicate and interpret signs referring to an individual or a context.

In order to understand such an issue, contributions from the ethnography of speech/communication (Hymes, 1974) are particularly important. This approach offers a systematic methodology, which highlights the interdependence of language, speech, communication and culture (cf. Hinnenkamp 1994: 2). Interpretative sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and its concept of contextualisation, analyse intercultural communication in holistic terms. Scientific research is currently considering the description of interactional dimensions and interpersonal dynamics along with possible failures in communication.

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