

## **Symbol Systems: A metaphor for understanding communication in cultural settings**

H. Wayland Cummings, Ph. D.

*University of Oklahoma, Professor Emeritus.*

Communication, as with so many concepts we use in the social sciences, has become so recondite that its use sounds valid, but sheds little light on human experience. To say people, organizations, or nations “have communication problems” is too often appearing as profound; many times releasing more academic fog; and most often saying nothing.

Scriven (1964) made a timeless observation about developing disciplines in the social sciences who often attempt to construct “precise, differential-equation-governed laws.” Scriven takes the position that to do so is an “energy-consuming impediment to the attempts to find causal relations (p.174).” What is critical, he continues, is to stay as close as possible to the ordinary language of its field, and avoid “piling up minor points about a theory that [has] absolutely no significant contribution to anything at all... (p. 176)”. The value of a useful metaphor is that it permits us to make meaningful statements about what we as a discipline have considered for a long time as the nature of communication, and how it works. Again, Scriven notes:

“It is important to distinguish between being able to talk about something in a particular vocabulary and understanding that vocabulary. The test as to whether a vocabulary ‘imparts new and genuine understanding’ is its ‘capacity to predict new relationships, to retrodict old ones, and to show a unity where previously there was a diversity,’ not its capacity to produce an ‘aha’ feeling (p. 190).”

We need to find and develop a useful metaphor for understanding how communication works in any interpersonal, inter-group, organizational, or intercultural setting, pointing us where to look for communication problems, whether in organizations, societies, or intercultural settings. Such an approach, when combined with a scheme for assessing competence, would add precision to the concern for identifying communication problems, and would make useful the interpretation of issues which plague cultural encounters. This focus also would allow a broader spectrum of media usages as carriers of communication

transactions. In an important sense, media in this framework becomes a variable, not a Rubicon where generalizations end. It would reduce the “it-depends-on-the-situation” to at least a meaningful value in a category variable for understanding where to look for variation in communication activity.

The purpose of this essay is to focus consideration on the use of symbols as an aid to bringing convergence to our research, and perhaps most of all, our understanding of communication in the intercultural setting. It is understood that the use of the term “symbols” could well be as ubiquitous as “communication,” but our intent here is to clarify what this author and others have thought to be a working metaphor for the study of symbol-using as communication, and more particularly, the study of symbol using as communication in intercultural settings.

To achieve these ends, we will a.) Address five types of symbols as data points in understanding the workings of communication; b.) Describe the tool-using metaphor, and its application to communication study; c.) Discuss the value of studying the functional uses of symbols in order to understand cultural, and intercultural communication issues; and d.) Draw conclusions about questions which require future research using the schema defined in this paper. There is the hope that the “message as a central focus” is not a pipe-dream, and that the symbol-usage we study is a uniting metaphor for those who are interested in the category variable of media, including mass, interpersonal, organizational, groups, and culture. Could it be that those who study communication and the aging, or experiential learning, or family communication, or in the area of feminist and women’s studies, or in intercultural environs might find a metaphor which allows a bridge which connects as well as denotes a situational propinquity and which also addresses social needs and concerns? Are there not any situations which do not require us to consider culture? gender? families? experiential learning? If we consider these situations as variables in a multivariate concern, we might be able to shed light on the bridges which may connect these diverse “settings.”

### **Symbols as Data Points in Communication**

The National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) determined that in 1970 it would seek to address, through a dedicated yearbook, the issue of media and symbols as forms of expression, communication, and education. These concerns were addressed in the 73<sup>rd</sup> yearbook, edited by David R. Olson (1974). Many important contributors to that yearbook are part of the history of the development of communication study, including Jerome Bruner, George Gerbner, Nathan Maccoby, and I. A. Richards. One of the specific contributors which has significantly influenced this author’s work in organizational communication is that of Larry Gross from the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Gross’ (1974) symbol types

underlie my own work, and that of many of my students (Long, 1979; Lewis, 1980; Kennan, 1981).

Five types of symbols are of significance: (1) words, letters, or arbitrary markings, and the sounds that may be associated with them; (2) graphics, and the sounds that may be associated with them; (3) socio-gestural symbols; (4) logico-mathematical symbols and the sounds that may be associated with them; and (5) musical notes, and the sounds that may be associated with them. Much of what we mean by words and letters as symbols are self-evident to the ordinary language user. Graphics refers to the use of color and shape, but may include sound graphics which abstract action-events; socio-gestural symbols are associated with the use of the human body as expressing meaningful content; logico-mathematical symbols focus on the use of mathematical or logical symbols, such as in symbolic or predicate logic, or computer programming languages; and musical notes which center on the production of sounds and their notations.

There are rules of grammar which are socially derived and shared by participants in users of the code. We can speak of ways a social group combines “words,” “graphics,” “socio-gestural” symbols, “logico-mathematical” symbols, and “musical notes.” Some of these rules are relatively precise, while others are imprecise, sometimes highly variable within a culture, with the rules changing frequently across time. An understanding, for example of a culture, begins with an immersion into the codes and the grammatical properties of those symbols. But, an understanding of a culture is not complete without inclusion of how those symbols are used. There are socially derived “rules” for the functional usages of those symbols. At the same time, there are less discernible rules when considering culture-driven graphics, such as in the fine arts. Some artists, for example, create unique rules to their own works, which by choice have no intent to communicate. Some of my artist friends tell me their work doesn’t say anything; it’s whatever you want it to say. This type of symbol creation does not constitute a message, and would not be a subject for communication as viewed in an intentional and social act.

The communication process permits humans to make portable their experiences through the use of symbols, and to use those symbols in certain special ways. Symbols are essential to humans in adapting to and/or manipulating their environments. Symbols help individuals to adapt to each other; to adjust one’s personal feelings and emotions; and to make possible highly complex social activities. Symbols permeate all human action.

In this author’s experience, walking into an organization delivers an array of symbol types, which, when understood, permit us to make meaningful observations about the communication environment and, in turn, the culture of that organization.

### **Four Functions of Symbols**

Numerous theorists, e.g., Dance and Larson (1976), Arnold and Bowers (1984), and Cummings, Long, and Lewis (1987), have addressed the issue of how, or for what purposes, does one communicate? For this author, symbols are viewed as being tools for some purpose, intent and/or function. Most communication theorists, though not all, believe that the action of communication is an intentional social act between two or more persons (Scott, 1977). Although many may disagree about what “intention” means, there are at least four “intentional” functions of the use of symbols: (1) symbols for the purpose of managing information; (2) symbols for the purpose of problem-solving; (3) symbols for the purpose of managing conflict; and (4) symbols for the purpose of controlling behaviors. This position argues that these functions for the use of symbols encompasses most of what we have traditionally studied in communication. It is not difficult for anyone in the field of communication to remember the “speeches to inform,” or the “speeches to persuade,” or the heavy emphasis in small group settings on “communication to identify and solve problems,” or “communication to handle interpersonal conflicts.” These categories are written in the historical tablets of our collective human experience, and our writings.

#### **Symbols for managing information**

Symbols at the most basic level provide the raw materials for information management (Cummings, Long, and Lewis, 1987). If symbols were arrayed randomly, or in a way in which participants don’t share the same rules, we would not be able to share information. The use of symbols in an ordered, non-random way whereby participants in a communication event share the rules for organizing those symbols is necessary to the social sharing of information. We organize symbols into “strings,” e.g., phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and messages, in order to use those symbols in our social collaboration. Humans collaborate through the use of symbols for the purpose of sharing information.

#### **Symbols for solving problems**

The ability to solve problems, particularly complex ones, is made possible by the symbols we use. It is more than just an issue of “code;” it is that we can simulate that which might be, or might have been, or might come to past. Problem “sensation” is almost intuitive. However, when we can use a symbol to “make portable” a problem, we can use other symbols to manipulate the sensation, ask about its cause, consider consequences, connect it to other experiences, and, perhaps simulate a solution before we actually execute a solution. Or, perhaps even consider that we need to “communicate” with others in ways to solve that problem.

One of the important lessons we learn about problem solving that people differ in the way they solve problems. Most important, however, we know that when a social group solves problems, there are styles and methods which could

be understood as part of the culture of that social group. U. S. Military organizations are quite different from U. S. Church groups in standardized ways of solving problems, and that offers evidence of cultural characteristics of each, and issues of intercultural cooperation should the two seek to collaborate with each other. Humans collaborate through the use of symbols for the purpose of solving problems.

**Symbols for Conflict Handling**

Many theories about conflict exist in the literature, and variation in emphases is mountainous. Nevertheless, many cultures can be characterized as handling interpersonal conflict in specified, culturally delimited ways. Organizations certainly differ in how conflicts are managed; the symbols that are used carry tones which suggest how conflicts are resolved. The musical works of John Williams in the cinema are filled with creative actions which denote conflict, and conflict resolutions.

Beyond this, how are symbols used, for example, in the creation of treaties, agreements, and contracts which include ways to solve future conflict, or resolve differences in interpretations. Court settlements are often understood as a process of conflict resolution. What symbols are used? Are there recurring patterns in the ways social groups settle conflicts? Humans collaborate through the use of symbols for the purpose of managing conflicts.

**Symbols to Control Behaviors**

Symbols do both reinforce and manage behaviors. Traditions within communication and social psychology have termed this as the domain of persuasion, with persuasion implying change from one type or set of behaviors to another. And for many years in the early communication studies, it was noted that "self persuasion" represents a major body of concern and research. However, it is also noteworthy that it is a significant area of concern in getting people to "keep on behaving in the same way they have." Many recited rituals, e.g., creeds, songs, often used in religious settings, have a larger function of controlling one's own beliefs and values (Cummings and Somervill, 1981). Thus, it is preferential to speak of behavior control as a method to control the behaviors of one's self, not just the behaviors of others. Humans collaborate through the use of symbols for the purpose of managing behaviors.

The tool-using metaphor for the use of symbols is a significant scheme for tying together a lot of research in the field of social psychology and communication. A web-search, for example, found the following: Symbols for managing information, 1,980,000 hits; symbols for problem solving, 246,000 hits; symbols for conflict resolution, i.e., management, 84,800 hits; and symbols for behavior change, 3,270,000 hits. Symbols used for behavior reinforcement produced 168,000 hits; Self-persuasion produced 225,000 hits. Scriven's observation previously cited continues to resonate here; that among other

purposes, a vocabulary should “show a unity where previously there was diversity....”

### **Symbol Using and Intercultural Issues**

Culture is usually defined in terms of properties shared by a social group. Typically, these properties include shared values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of doing things. An excellent example of a definition, which includes the concerns here for the use of symbols, is found in Cupach and Canary (2000). They state:

“Culture refers to a group-level construct that embodies a distinctive system of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, rituals, symbols, and meanings that is shared by a majority of interacting individuals in a community (p. 124).”

The culture construct must be used at any systemic level, whether addressing families, organizations, national regions, or international groupings. It is applicable to any social group which has a history, as noted above, where “interacting individuals” hold certain common beliefs, norms, values, and traditions. Beyond this, it has been argued that a culture will act in certain ways to cause members of that culture to act, think, and value certain elements of their shared traditions, and to be suspicious or uncomfortable, or lacking in understanding when immersed in a different culture—much as shown in Gudykunst and Kim’s (2002) work on problems when members of a culture become sojourners in a foreign culture. Much, for example, of this work is also applicable to organizations within a larger culture, or between organizations which have quite different cultural properties.

The metaphor used in this essay would suggest that to study a culture, we must have some sense of the way the different types of symbols are used. For example: How are graphic symbols used as a tool for problem solving in a culture; how are musical symbols used as a tool for information exchange, or conflict management in a culture. It is argued here that symbol types, and symbol uses may indeed reveal some important issues in intercultural/international understanding. One interesting example is that of Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera (2001) who studied the structural properties of symbolic objects such as commercial brands. As psychologists, they were interested in the differing ways in which commercial brands function as carriers of culture, and how they may be related to certain personality characteristics. Much of that study goes beyond what this author considers to be a communication focus, but it is an example of the role of symbols as carriers of culture, albeit for different purposes than that which would concern the specialist in communication.

### **Some Conclusions**

One might ask hundreds of questions about the kind of research that could be generated from the metaphor used in this essay. Some areas, such as mathematics, are fairly well understood as they fit in a cultural perspective.

However, if we understand mathematics as a language, would we find different ways in which mathematics is used to solve problems, or exchange information with others, or handle conflicts? The use of mathematics for exchanging information is quite common. It is less common for communication researchers to study the ways mathematics might be used to handle conflicts, solve problems, or control behaviors.

It is tempting to consider the role of words, as the oral and written word has held the most attention in our work. But there are many other considerations. From an array of case studies, we do know there are significant differences between Plains Indians (Native Americans) and Anglo-Americans in how they use symbols to manage conflict (Kennan, 1981). Much of the emphasis in the Kennan study was focused on socio-gestural characteristics, such as eye movements, and hand gestures. But much more needs to be addressed.

And finally, many of us conduct research dictated by the setting, and we use that setting as our universe of discourse almost as though the setting defined the discipline. For example, organization is not a discipline for communication researchers; communication is the discipline, of which organizations is one categorical setting. It is easy and seductive to get outside our area of expertise when we play with concepts we know little about. It is important to address the way communication works in any setting, not primarily to understand all there is to know about the setting, but to search how the communication process transcends across from one setting to another.

*H. Wayland Cummings is professor of emeritus in communication at the University of Oklahoma. He holds a Ph.D. (1970) in communication from Michigan State University. He has taught organizational communication, group processes, and research design at the university, and remains active in continuing education programs.*

## References

- Aaker, J. L., Benet-Martinez, V., & Garolera, J.  
2001 Consumption symbols as carriers of culture: a study of Japanese and Spanish brand personality constructs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, No. 3, 492-508.
- Arnold, C. and Bowers, J. T.  
1984 *Handbook of rhetorical and communication theory*. Boston, MA. Allyn and Bacon.
- Cummings, H. W., Long, L. W., & Lewis, M. L.  
1987 *Managing communication in organizations* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Scottsdale, AZ. Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Publishers.

- Cummings, H. W., & Somerville, C.  
1981 *Overcoming communication barriers in the church*. Valley Forge. Judson Press.
- Cupach, W. R., & Canary, D. J.  
2000 *Competence in interpersonal conflict*. Prospect Heights, IL. Waveland Press.
- Dance, F. E. X., and Larson, C. E.  
1976 *Speech communication: concepts and behavior*. New York. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Gross, Larry  
1974 Modes of communication and the acquisition of symbolic competence. (pp. 56-80) in Olson, David R. (ed.). *Media and symbols: The forms of expression, communication and education*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.
- Gudykunst, W. & Kim, Y. Y.  
2002 *Communicating with strangers* (4<sup>th</sup> edition). New York City. McGraw Hill.
- Kennan, W. R.  
1981 An exploratory study of intercultural communication between Native Americans and Anglo-American college students. An unpublished Ph. D. dissertation. Norman, OK. University of Oklahoma.
- Lewis, M. L.  
1980 Communication roles as predictors of motivation toward productivity under conditions of groupness and organizationness. An unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Norman, OK. University of Oklahoma.
- Long, L. W.  
1979 An exploratory study of communication roles as predictors of job satisfaction and management preference. An unpublished Ph. D. dissertation. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma.
- Olson, David R. (ed.)  
1974 *Media and symbols: The forms of expression, communication and education*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.
- Scott, R. L.  
1977 Communication as an intentional social system. *Human Communication Research*. 3, 258-268.
- Scriven, M.  
1964 Views of human nature. In Wann, T. W. (ed.) *Behaviorism and phenomenology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.