Cultural Assumptions Underlying Message Design Logic: Premises of Development, Preference, and Understanding

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Abstract

In 1988, O'Keefe proposed the theory of message design logics. Rather than a theory of communication, it is a "theory of communication theories," focusing on the bases from which individuals envision the practice and possibilities of communication. In this view, three message design logics represent fundamentally different ways to see the communicative world. O'Keefe assumes a developmental continuum, with certain communicators progressing toward more sophistication and an ability to produce messages designed to accomplish multiple goals and assumed to be preferred by others.

In this article, these last assumptions of the theory are questioned. Toward this end, the theory and associated design logics are reviewed. The development of message design logics is examined. The relationship between cultural upbringing and design logic is discussed. Finally, attention is given to design logic preference and message evaluation. In particular, interest centers in interactions where communicators are employing different logics, which may occur especially frequently in intercultural interactions.

Since the 1970s, constructivist research, primarily in communication but also in psychology, has yielded considerable findings illustrating relationships between individuals' communication skills and the messages they produce. In particular, one significant line of work within this tradition has addressed the degree to which demands of situations, particular others, and interpersonal and task goals are accommodated to in communicator messages. By the early 1980s, O'Keefe and Delia (1982) described this work as centered on goal integration – in particular, the degree and manner of attempting to address multiple, often competing, goals in a message.

Later, based on her work studying messages and goal integration, O'Keefe (1988) proposed the theory of Message Design Logics (MDL). Although this theory grew out of constructivist work, it differs from constructivism in that MDL is more a "theory of communication theories, an analysis of the alternative ways in which individuals (or communities) might constitute communication practices" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 98). And O'Keefe and Delia (1988) have asserted that MDL may serve to further explain many findings of constructivist research.

Reading and rereading hundreds and hundreds of messages across years of research led O'Keefe to the realization that communicators seemed to fundamentally differ in how they defined their tasks and approached their goals. Although it is widely accepted that "communication-constituting concepts" (e.g., Grice's, 1975, Cooperative Principle) serve to organize messages in pursuit of particular goals, far less often explored is the possibility that individuals differ in their basic views of communication – what its purposes are and what it can serve to accomplish – and that such basic differences account for the considerable variance in message production and interpretation (O'Keefe, 1988). The theory of Message Design Logics (O'Keefe, 1988) suggests that there are at least three fundamentally different views of communication (i.e., Expressive, Conventional, and Rhetorical) and examines each of these as an inherently logical system for viewing the communication world, one's relations to others, and the possibilities for one's messages. Additionally, as is common in constructivist work, O'Keefe (1988) assumes a developmental continuum for communication skill – "as individuals change with development, they come to have different communication-constituting concepts, different patterns of message organization, and different modes of message interpretation" (p. 80).

In O'Keefe's writings it is clear that her belief is that these three logics are hierarchically ordered -- individuals begin with an expressive orientation, then as we mature we move to a conventional logic, and finally some may progress to the rhetorical position, the highest level of development. The purpose of this article is to examine this last assumption in light of cultural and intercultural differences. In particular, given other constructivist findings linking culture and communication and the import of significant others in the development of communication skills, this developmental assumption is questioned. First, an overview of the theory and each of the three message design logics is provided. Second, O'Keefe's (1988) view on the development of individual design logics is reviewed. Third, links between message design logics and culture are examined. And finally, arguments for studying message preference and evaluation based on culture are made. In particular, research is needed to examine intercultural interactions and the interplay of message design logics.

O'Keefe's (1988) Theory of Message Design Logics

O'Keefe's (1988) theory assumes that communication is a goal-directed

process in which communicators produce messages designed to accomplish their objectives and interpret messages produced by others in light of these goals and, typically, to gain insight into the perspective or goals of the other person. It is through the creative processes of message production and interpretation that one makes sense of communicative events and develops strategies to pursue goals. And in these processes, one's assumptions about communication and the communication-relevant dimensions of situations and persons guide one in making interpretations and are evidenced conversationally. For example, what one person is willing to count as evidence, invokes as expected of others or her/himself, and assumes as conversationally-relevant, possible, or likely differs from how another may see the same situation – in fact, there is considerable variation across individuals (O'Keefe, 1988, 1990, 1991; O'Keefe & Lambert, 1995). Yet, these individual views are the bedrock on which messages are interpreted and produced. They form the basis for how we "frame" our messages and evaluate those of others. And they reflect our "implicit theory" of what communication is fundamentally about – what it is designed to accomplish.

According to O'Keefe (1988, 1990), it is these implicit theories that guide all communicators in their interactions. Regardless of how simple or complex a message may be, beliefs about the function of communication undergird its production. In part to reflect the deeply engrained nature of these root assumptions, O'Keefe (1988) renamed them message design logics. Based on years of research analyzing different message types, O'Keefe (1988, 1990) asserts that at least three fundamentally distinct message design logics (MDLs) are regularly evidenced in talk. Each of the MDLs is internally consistent, yet fundamentally different than the other two. And each design logic is its own theory of communication – what it is, how it operates, and what it can achieve. Through examining the MDLs, people's beliefs about communication are evidenced, and differences in assumptions across people can be seen. These logics show that views of how communication works vary considerably across people. When employing the same MDL, communicators typically have greater understanding of the other person's message and methods. But when communicators' assumptions are rooted in differing MDLs, then interactions are often more difficult, disconcerting, or at the very least puzzling.

In O'Keefe's view, each of the MDLs is "associated with a constellation of related beliefs: a communication-constituting concept, a conception of the functional possibilities of communication, unit formation procedures, and principles of coherence" (1988, p. 84). In part to capture the premises on which each rests, she labels the MDLs Expressive, Conventional, and Rhetorical.

Beyond the developmental assumptions described above (i.e., the logics are hierarchically ordered), O'Keefe (1988) asserts that differences in MDL typically are only evidenced in particular kinds of communication situations. That is, most adult social interaction follows conventional parameters – we all

learn "easy," "automatic" means to navigate common cultural situations in which we regularly find ourselves. It is in less typical or problematic situations that our design logic is revealed. In other words, "message variation … will be suppressed in simple communication situations and called out as situations become more complex" (O'Keefe, 1988, p.91). Complex situations are ones where there are multiple goals, which may be in conflict or inconsistent with one another, that are difficult to achieve. Such "prism" situations draw out these differences in communicators; that is, they splay messages into one of these three categories, Expressive, Conventional, or Rhetorical.

The Expressive MDL. According to an Expressive MDL, the primary purpose of communication is self-expression – expressing how one feels and what one's thoughts are. And successful communication hinges on the conversational partner(s) understanding one's viewpoints. Hence from this vantage point, good communication is clear communication. Individuals operating from an expressive logic system are "very literal" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 84) and interpret messages as "simple expressions of belief" (p. 85). Accordingly, such communicators do not recognize that messages may be designed to service multiple goals and tend to "interpret messages as independent units rather than as threads in an interactional fabric, and so seem to disregard context" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 84).

"The idea that messages might be systematically designed to cause particular reactions is alien (and possibly reprehensible) to the Expressive communicator -- messages are understood as simple expressions of beliefs" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85). Within this framework, then, there are only two possibilities between thoughts and messages – either one says what is on one's mind or one withholds it, by lying or editing. At the heart of this MDL lies "a desire to conduct communication as full and open disclosure of current thoughts and feelings, concern for the fidelity of messages, and … anxiety about deceptive communication" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85).

In some situations, individuals using an Expressive MDL face a choice between telling the entire truth or withholding parts of it – whether to be honest, the ethically correct choice, or to lie or edit. However, despite their preference for honest self-expression, such individuals are aware of politeness conventions and power relations and may chose, in spite of their leanings, to edit some desired utterances rather engage in blanket violations of expectations. Yet, these will be communicators who take "pride in saying what they think," are recognized for "wearing their hearts on their sleeves," and value "being 'up front'" with people. And their deep concern with honesty and beliefs in the importance of self-expression, combined with their distrust of social politeness norms as "fake" and "a cover up," will sometimes lead them into utterances that wound others or are not seemingly directed at present or future goals.

O'Keefe (1988) identifies MDL by assessing the content of particular messages. Certain message features and types are exhibited with great frequency in expressive messages. For example, expressive messages are likely to "contain pragmatically pointless content" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 85), such as long explanations of what the speaker wants despite it being clear that the other cannot grant these wishes, "recycled" elements (covering the same conversational ground multiple times as it recurs in the person's thinking), or insults.

Another feature of expressive messages is that they tend to be "idiosyncratic and subjective rather than conventional and intersubjective" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 86). "When one asks of an Expressive message, why did the speaker say this *now*, the obvious answer is generally: because the immediately prior event caused the speaker to have such-and-so reaction or to make such-and-so mental association, and the speaker then said what he or she was thinking" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 86). The theme to the message is the thoughts of the speaker or the feelings s/he has about another's action or situation. As such, these messages tend to be reactive and focused on prior events, ones in the immediate past or ones that the speaker is recalling.

The Conventional MDL. In this message design logic, the primary purpose of communication is cooperation according to pre-existing conventions. "The Conventional view thus subsumes the Expressive premise; language is viewed as a means of expressing propositions, but the propositions one expresses are specified by the social effect one wants to achieve rather than the thoughts one happens to have" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 86). In other words, one makes conversational moves to accomplish recognized speech acts (e.g., according to the work on speech act theory, Searle, 1969). Using conventional (recognized and oft times predictable) methods, one works to accomplish goals based on defined roles, identities, and situations.

Given that this logic appeals to social conventions, it is not surprising that individuals employing a Conventional MDL tend to assume cooperation from others. One expects that people will behave as they "should," engaging in behaviors appropriate to context and role. To be competent, one must be appropriate.

Just as an Expressive MDL is identified by message features, so is a Conventional MDL; however, the message features differ considerably. Almost always, in Conventional messages there is a clearly identifiable speech act performed. "The elements of such messages are generally mentions of felicity conditions on the core speech act, the structure of rights and obligations that give force to the speech act being performed, or the mitigating circumstances or conditions that would bear on the structure of rights and obligations within the situation (e.g., excuses)" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87). Unlike Expressive messages,

which as noted above are typically reactive, Conventional messages indicate an understanding of convention and follow rules as they apply to specific contexts. "If one asks of a conventional message, why did the speaker say this *now*, the answer is generally that this is the normal and appropriate thing to say under the circumstances" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87).

The Rhetorical MDL. Within the Rhetorical logic, communication is fluid and flexible – a process of creation where selves and situations are negotiated. In contrast to the Conventional MDL where identity and contest are "given" or fixed, the Rhetorical logic sees these aspects of interaction as changeable or open for negotiation. The goal of the Rhetorical MDL is to use social negotiation as a means of generating acceptance of identities and situations where goals can be achieved. In other words, a Rhetorical message will work to create possibilities where interaction goals can be met.

Where Expressive messages react to past events and Conventional ones attempt to achieve cooperation based on present identities, a Rhetorical orientation tries to create identities in ways that will allow for problem-solving. According to O'Keefe (1998), the rhetorical lens is a "forward-looking" one. Conventional and Rhetorical MDLs hold opposing views of message and context. "In the Conventional view, context is given and the relevant features of the context anchor meaning; in the Rhetorical view, 'context' is created by the message, or at least by the process of communication, and only the interactionally achieved 'architecture of intersubjectivity' anchors meaning" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 87; also see Rommetveit, 1974, for discussion of the "architecture of intersubjectivity"). In other words, then, context is a resource – one that can be managed, or even exploited.

With this focus on negotiation, messages are proactive, rather than reactive in nature. Communication is structured according to the goals a rhetorical communicator wants to accomplish or facilitate – "messages are designed toward effects rather than in response to the actions of others" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 88). Like Expressive and Conventional ones, Rhetorical utterances also can be identified by particular message features. For example, Rhetorical messages "contain elaborating and contextualizing clauses and phrases that provide explicit definitions of the context. They convey a definite sense of role and character through manipulation of stylistic elements in a marked and coherent way" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 88). In trying to identify why something was said in a rhetorical utterance, typically the answer is to pursue a particular goal. If trying to determine the message theme, it is usually that the "elements can be interpreted as steps in a plan or as moments in a coherent narrative or as displays in a consistent character (and usually all of these). In short, the internal coherence of Rhetorical messages derives from the elements being related by intersubjectively available, goal-oriented schemes" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 88).

Development of MDL – The Ordering of the Three Logics

According to O'Keefe (1988), the three MDLs occur in a developmental progression. It is through increased knowledge about communication and integration of this information with existing knowledge that development occurs. First, one begins with an Expressive orientation. Then at some stage of development many individuals recognize that "to perform" one must work within a set of existing social conventions. Then, "spontaneous expression is supplanted by the expression required for the performance of conventionally defined actions" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 89). Later, it is possible that one discovers that "the ability to reorder social situations through language requires that one come to have an abstract sense of communication as a process in which ways of speaking and acting are not merely responses to the situation but constitutive of the situation; conventionalized action is reorganized within an elaborated conception of communicative effects" (p. 89). Thus, O'Keefe (1988) argues that Expressive logic is a precursor to Conventional logic, and that Conventional logic is a prerequisite for Rhetorical logic.

She further asserts that the social environments to which we are exposed shape our development. If surrounded by a social environment or culture in which negotiation is possible, then persons will proceed more quickly to a Rhetorical MDL. In fact, O'Keefe (1988) believes that "persons who are surrounded by those who use a Rhetorical communication system will find it difficult to avoid developing a Rhetorical logic of communication, since the messages they hear will have negotiation and reality constitution as obvious and salient features. By contrast, persons who live in a world where power and resource control are used to fix meaning and social arrangements (e.g., people who are surrounded by others who only achieved a Conventional communication system) will find it difficult to develop a belief in the social constitution of reality and the power of language to reorder social life" (p. 89). And in short, O'Keefe (1988, 1990) sees the developmental progression as hierarchical – transitions upward lead to greater complexity and effectiveness. "The development is from the least sophisticated level, where individual wants and goals are prioritized, to a second level where the individual recognizes that personal goals must be pursued according to social rules, and finally to the highest level, rhetorical, which … (is) 'consensus-seeking'" (Adams, 2001, p. 43).

Culture and Message Design Logic

In both constructivism and MDL research, culture and community are seen to play important roles in the development and shaping of interpersonal communication skills (O'Keefe, 1988; O'Keefe & Delia, 1982; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987). And particular sorts of communication (i.e., developmentally ordered abilities) are viewed as better means to accomplish

social objectives. In a review of the constructivist research tradition, Applegate (1990) pointed to the links between the development of communication abilities and culture. "People are socialized into communication systems with particular 'logics' for designing messages; logics which define the value and function of communication itself. Previous research has shown relations between cultural background and an orientation to person-centered communication. If people must accommodate to a system in which communication is valued as a means of bridging the gap between individual differences and negotiating individual realities, then these people will develop interpersonal schemata and strategic abilities designed to be successfully social within such a negotiation focused worldview. Other more traditional cultural communication systems might value conventions and rules as the basis for communication. Within such systems successful, competent communication is not that which best negotiates individual differences. Rather good communication is 'appropriate' communication – communication which successfully enacts the correct cultural conventions" (Applegate, 1990, pp. 224-225).

Adams (2001) asserts that a "prosocial bias" is inherent in the framing of both constructivist and MDL writings, and that this bias results in a need for recontextualization of some findings and reanalysis of the proposed developmental hierarchies. Whether or not he is correct, too little attention has been paid to analyzing communicative interpretations when individuals exhibiting differing MDLs interact. For example, O'Keefe's (1988, 1990) conceptualization would predict that rhetorical messages would be "victorious" ones – such messages are more complex and sophisticated, thus superior and should prevail. However, most people who have witnessed a communicator willing to go on ad infinitum hurling insults, making threats, and talking about how s/he was wronged have sometimes seen other, seemingly more advanced, communicators unable to stop this process, thwarted in reaching whatever goals they had in mind, and frustrated by their attempts being blocked. Such observations call for additional research to establish predictions on the conversational outcomes when individuals working with differing MDLs disagree.

Furthermore, how a message design logic is viewed likely depends on one's own cultural membership. And how interactions involving differing MDLs proceed needs to be investigated from an intercultural perspective. If culture is in large part a predictor of an individual's MDL, then cultural preferences also likely influence how one evaluates what is successful or preferred, relevant or irrelevant, appropriate or inappropriate. O'Keefe's (1988, 1990) theory of MDL emerged from her reading of messages produced to respond to particular situations. However, like much academic research, it often focused on white, middle and upper middle class, university students. So, in part, it may be an interpretation of the cultural preferences and typical communication leanings of

these individuals. And it may say little about other cultural groups.

Additionally, despite what may be seen as preferred or sophisticated in this cultural group, other groups may evaluate the same communicative messages much differently. For example, Adams (2001) suggests that valuing some forms of communication over others (e.g., prosocial communication) does not take into account motive, and this may be especially important when individual goals conflict with community ones. In particular, some of Adams' previous work (1991) suggests that not only are rhetorical messages not necessarily the most effective in some communication cultures, they may not always be seen as the most sophisticated (e.g., some participants rated such messages as condescending). Further, Burgoon (1995) suggests that patients who fail to follow doctor's orders are most responsive to verbally aggressive strategies, not person-centered ones.

It follows, then, that different individuals, groups, or cultures may have different interpretations of what represents competent communication. Already, some studies have indicated that evaluation of rhetorical messages is mediated by one's own MDL (e.g., Peterson & Albrecht, 1996; O'Keefe et al., 1997). Given that MDLs are linked to cultural membership (i.e., developed through the process of socialization), Adams (2001) asserts that "we should examine the varieties of design logics that might be cultivated in different communities rather than assuming that a rhetorical logic or person-centered orientation are the desired forms …" (p. 48).

Continued Questions, Future Directions

Following Adams' (2001) logic above, communities or cultures that value self-expression and honest, open communication of feelings may not only encourage the development of an Expressive MDL, but they may also more highly value messages produced from this design logic. This valuing conceivably could be exhibited subtly, thorough various sorts of reinforcement, or more overtly, through expressed pleasure or displeasure of other's communication. Members of cultural groups typically described as self-expressive or openly emotional (e.g., African Americans, Latino, Polish) may not only be more likely to develop an Expressive MDL, they also may evaluate messages based on this dimension. That is, communicators using other design logics may be seen as bored, withholding, or suspicious (e.g., Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Kochman, 1981; Marin & Marin, 1991; Richmond, 1995).

Persons raised in other cultures, such as those placing a high value on harmony, group consensus, and position in the social network (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai), may learn to avoid emotional expression. This socialization often occurs because individual emotions are seen as potential disruptions to social rapport or otherwise inappropriate (e.g., Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Katzenstein, 1989). Such individuals are less likely to employ an

Expressive MDL as adults. It seems likely that in cultures that heavily value "role" or position in the social hierarchy, eschew emotional displays, and stress politeness and interactional norms (e.g., Japanese) individuals are more likely to develop and exhibit a Conventional MDL. However, it is also possible that the subtle and intricate nature of communication in such cultures facilitates development of a Rhetorical orientation to messages.

And it may not be that surprising that white, middle and upper middle class culture in the United States (and similar cultures elsewhere, Australia, Canada, New Zealand) may be the most likely to facilitate development of Rhetorical logics. This culture tends to value talk, assertiveness, independent thinking and to accept well-managed disagreement (Tannen, 1999). Although O'Keefe's arguments are primarily based on analysis of messages produced by members of these groups, little is currently known overall about whether these cultures do, in fact, encourage Rhetorical thinking more than other cultures. Through additional inquiry, we may come to understand much more about the influence of cultural upbringing on the development of MDL. Furthermore, such research may suggest other possible mitigating variables also of key import in development of MDL.

Beyond the development and use of MDL, however, are important questions concerning evaluations of messages and interactants when design logics differ. Although some research is emerging here, little overall has been done to evaluate the impact of such differences. Common sense, and a substantial amount of research, tells us that we prefer interacting with those who are similar to us, as they provide general validation for us and our communicative interactions tend to proceed much more smoothly. The experiences we've all had wondering "Why is this person telling me this?," "Why is the person telling me this now"?, or "What does this have to do with anything?" are likely examples of differing design logics in action. And one of the assumptions undergirding the theory of message design logics, that rhetorical communication is preferable, more sophisticated, and more likely to prevail in conversational interaction, needs continued analysis. Though this design logic may be most valued by some communicators, it may not be held in such high regard by others.

Just as "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," what is regarded as competent communication may be in the judgments of the message evaluator – and as MDLs vary, so may such judgments. Much more attention and analysis needs to be devoted to differences in message preferences across cultural groups and individual design logics.

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