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Interconnectivity and Metacommunication

Hayet Bahri and Rob Williams

The study of interpersonal communication touches on a range of different disciplines, each with its own focus. This has given rise to an apparent fragmentation in the literature (O'Keefe, 1993; Craig 1999; Stephen, 2014) which is manifested in the categorisation of the various components of a communicative act, and even the subdivision of the categories established. This can be seen in the study of metacommunication, which although considered an essential component of human interaction (Anderson, 2009; Wilmot, 1980) has been subdivided into a myriad of constituent parts. Whilst the separation of various components permits detailed focus on different facets of interpersonal interaction there is a risk that the complementarity of the various facets may be underestimated or even lost. Indeed to autonomise each aspect of a communicative act may not be conducive to a comprehensive understanding of what happens in an interaction since all elements, verbal, non-verbal and contextual, to name but a few, need to be considered and interpreted simultaneously. Approaches to the study of metacommunication, whilst being multidimensional, appear to have led to fragmentation. It is our contention that understanding what

constitutes a complete communicative interaction involves the consideration of these various aspects at the same time. Starting from the position that no category exists in a vacuum and is part and parcel of a whole communicative act, this article draws on Wilmot's seminal (1980) article among others and considers a more holistic approach to communication as an adjunct to the current tendency for separation.

To illustrate this method, the article identifies various aspects and categories within the area of metacommunication and examines the convergence and potential divergence within them. Through the case study of silence as a communicative act that appears to bridge various subdivisions, this paper argues for an umbrella conceptualisation that unifies rather than compartmentalises the various aspects of metacommunication.

KEYWORDS: metacommunication, connectivity, interpersonal communication, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, silence in communication

INTRODUCTION

In the study of interpersonal communication, the literature tends

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towards a fragmented treatment of the communicative act taking each element as a standalone phenomenon. There have been discussions of how these perspectives may dialogue with each other (Craig, 1999) and accounts of how the influence of different fields have contributed to the development of studies in interpersonal communication (Hargie, 2011; Berger, 2014). However, the prevalence for categorisation into separate areas seems to have remained. The conceptual evolution of the term metacommunication appears to have privileged certain focuses over others, but also engendered a consideration of it in a non-holistic manner. This trajectory started with Bateson (1972) talking about codification and relationship. Yet it would appear that even he was not so wedded to the notion of a dichotomy, rather that of a continuum. This is echoed in Wilmot (1980, p. 67), stating *‘Metacommunication is an intriguing concept that should be explored in all its manifestations’* and Bochner in McLish (1990), who defines communication as *‘a vague, fragmented and loosely defined subject that intersects all the behavioral, social and cultural*

sciences. There are no rigorous definitions that limit the scope of the field, no texts that comprehensively state its foundations, and little agreement among its practitioners about which frameworks or methods offer most promise for unifying the field’. (Bochner, 1985, in McLish, 1990, p. 299).

Perhaps it is precisely the looseness of definition that has helped the pursuance of differing areas of investigation. This article seeks to challenge what it perceives as arbitrary and perhaps not always useful fragmentation. Whilst the insights gained by such an approach have been beneficial in improving our understanding of the various components of any single communicative act, it is our belief that unless these components are considered as interdependent and interconnected, and that they cannot exist as separate units, then the advantages for our understanding can only be limited. For example the division into textual and non-textual elements may preclude insights from one perspective informing

the other. It may be that there is a tacit acceptance that all components are interdependent, but there appears to be a lack of explicit acknowledgement of this in current debates. Even where the interface between different aspects of communication is discussed, this tends to take the form of a dialogue or juxtaposition of two elements and a resulting dialectic (Craig, 1999) rather than a fusion of what is now an increasingly large number of constituent parts. To echo Jensen (1973) further research is needed into the study of metacommunication as it is traditionally understood.

The paper will focus on the face-to-face interaction between two participants and, having reviewed the evolution of various different paradigms, it will analyse the use of silence as an illustration of why it is important to adopt a holistic approach and the possible implications this may have for educators in the field of interpersonal communication.

A plurality of dualities

Much of the literature appears to view metacommunication through the lens of dualities, which can be seen in a variety of paradigms. Wilmot (1980) suggests that providing as wide a range of perspectives as possible is important to gain a better understanding of interaction.

'By broadening our perspectives, we can begin to characterize the crucial

importance that all types of framing serve for helping people understand their relationships with others. Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, the relationships between people reside at the core of the interpersonal communication process' (Wilmot, 1980, p. 65).

Below is an overview of some of the concepts that have informed the continuing discussions.

Message versus Metamessage

Perhaps one of the starting points for division is the initial separation into message (the parts of a communicative act that carry content) and metamessage (the parts that indicate to the recipient how to interpret the message) (Bateson et al. (1963); Bateson (1972); Wilmot (1980); Newman (1981); Tannen (1985); and De Vito (2000). Since Bateson (1972) this division has framed much discussion in the literature. Subsequent subcategorisations and analyses are seen through a prism of opposition and this often remains the case regardless of the disciplinary lens through which communication is viewed. Metacommunication itself has been divided into subcategories, sometimes linked to the purpose of the communication, sometimes linked to the means of delivery employed – hence the division into textual meaning (written discourse) and non-textual meaning (considering the grammar and syntax of spoken discourse). Much of

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the debate in recent literature seems to focus on the textual aspects of interaction management, yet there has been a growing focus on the non-textual element as being the main carrier of metessages in face to face interaction. This can be seen in the increase of publications on body language, for instance. However, such divisions can be seen as restrictive since they can imply a separation that does not take place in interaction and suggests a possible hierarchy that is unhelpful when considering the communicative act.

As Wilmot (1980) puts it:

‘Both verbal and nonverbal channels serve metacommunication and to limit metacommunication to the nonverbal band is both too restrictive and conceptually misleading’ (Wilmot, 1980, p.62).

For example, prefacing a comment with *‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but...’* is a metmessage telling the interlocutor how the speaker wants the interlocutor to process the forthcoming message. The same information could be given within the intonation pattern of *‘I’ve got something to tell you’* and be clearly understood by the

interactant. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

Information versus context

Having established the distinction between message and metmessage, Bateson (1951) furthers this division by identifying two levels of meaning within the metmessage: markers that indicate how the message is to be interpreted and markers which refer to the relationship between the interlocutors and/or the context where the interaction is taking place. *‘We shall describe as metacommunication all exchanged cues and proposition about a) codification and b) relationship about the communicators’* (Reusch & Bateson, 1951, p.209).

One could argue the validity of his point, if one considers the example of an orientation session at the beginning of a university year, where the lecturer could introduce himself as John Smith, possibly give his job title, and state what classes he will be teaching, thus giving his name and function and context. If he then goes on to say, *‘Just call me John’* he is establishing

a certain kind of relationship with the students. Another example would be when a Head of Department fixes a meeting with a junior staff member saying *'Come and see me tomorrow at 3.00 in my office'*. Here there are two levels. At the level of content the information is that there will be a meeting between the two. At the level of context/relationship this is a potentially serious event, the specification of the venue and the precise time denote the hierarchy between the two interlocutors, which may be accentuated by the tone with which the statement is expressed.

This distinction can be seen in a variety of fields. Within psychology, the notion of therapist metacommunication and its impact on client collaboration (Li et al. 2016) indicates a level of understanding by the client that is perhaps governed by the context in which the interaction takes place. In education, work on classroom talk among young learners notes the importance of metacommunication as part of pedagogical strategies to enhance oral competence and possibly subject matter knowledge (van der Veen et al. 2017). It is interesting to note that many articles seem to choose hierarchical relationships as their focus of study.

Episodic versus relationship

Bateson (1963) was not unique in separating various components of the communicative act. Understanding has

progressed from the simple perspective of encoding/decoding, and communication is no longer seen as a linear event, but more as a fluid, cyclical process involving constant reappraisal and adjustment. Communication is at times viewed from the perspective of focus – is the focus more on the event/content or on the relationship that is being established between the interactors? Metacommunicative cues can therefore be categorised into those that concern the episode and those that concern the relationship (Wilmot, 1980).

Examples of episodic expressions might be expressions such as, *'What I mean by this is ...'* or, *'Can you give me more information about...?'* or *'I'm here to book a holiday.'* and could be further divided into expressions of clarification (both offering and requesting), purpose, and summarising, among others. Relationship expressions might include phrases of approval, eg. *'That's a good idea'*, positive or negative evaluation, eg. *'You're great at this'* or relationship affirmation, eg. *'Speaking to you as a friend...'*. An example where the two support each other could be found in the statement *'I'm confiding in you because I trust you'*. Here the fact that a confidential exchange is going to take place prefaces the nature of the content, which in turn is supported by the declaration of trust and the explicit mention of the nature of the relationship between the two interlocutors.

However, the two categories can overlap and the division may not always be clear-cut. An expression such as, *'This is going really well.'* could refer to both the event (a discussion about the progress of a meeting) and the relationship (*'I am enjoying the interaction'*).

Digital versus Analogue

A new terminology to reflect this separation was coined by Watzlawick (1967), who, as part of his five axioms of communication, divided it into digital and analogue – digital being synonymous with content and analogue being that which created the emotional bond. This emphasises the duality of a message with two complementary modes. The categorisation has remained (possibly because of the analogy with technical and computing terminology) and appears in discussions of how nowadays messages are understandable to an international audience due in part to the universality of analogue signs (Codoban, 2013). Digital is equated to text and analogue to non-verbal communication and, as we shall see below, primacy is given to the analogue, non-verbal elements, since these are what are connected with emotional and emotive content and these are what remain in the mind after an interaction has been completed. Egolf and Chester's (2013) assertion that analogue communication is where message and meaning merge, may also support the

belief that it is the non-verbal that makes a message memorable.

Verbal and non-verbal: separate or complementary?

The ongoing debate on the complementarity or otherwise of verbal and non-verbal communication does not seem to have lost its intensity, nor does the literature appear to have come to a consensus as to how to define this division. De Vito (2000) states, *'you communicate non-verbally when you gesture, smile, or frown, widen your eyes, move your chair closer to someone, wear jewellery, touch someone, raise your vocal volume, or even when you say nothing'* (De Vito, 2000, p. 130).

This seems to echo the notion of an analogue mode that includes gestures and postures that some have found perhaps more universal than others, based on the assumption that the body cannot lie, although these are open to more subjective interpretations. Just as there may be overlaps in the episodic and relationship categories within text, so the division between what is verbal and what is non-verbal metacommunication is also not clearly defined. Hargie (2011) offers a useful summary of the distinctions that can be drawn, one of the main features being that verbal communication involves discrete packaging of sense into words which are often explicit and carry predominantly content messages.

Non-verbal communication is, by contrast, implicit and has a main focus on the emotional/relational aspect of communication (Hargie, 2011, p. 45-47). Mandal (2014) identifies categories of verbal vocal (for example, (eg. the intonation pattern used to express mood, opinion or intent), verbal non-vocal (eg., sounds used to indicate reaction, hesitation etc), and non-verbal non-vocal (facial expressions, gesture etc). Hargie (2011) offers a more complex range of separate areas that make up non-verbal communication:

- haptics (using physical touch);
- kinesics (movement, gestures, posture, facial expressions);
- proxemics (body distance);
- vocalics (Hargie, 2011, p. 56).

To these is also added information put across through physical characteristics and through the social surroundings in which the interaction takes place. Contextual metacommunicative cues and interpretations that may arise from them are evident in Harrison (1974) who identifies performance codes based on

bodily action, artificial codes (use of clothing etc), mediational codes (that take place when different media are used to enact the exchange) and contextual codes.

The notion of contextual codes can be found in Egolf and Chester (2013) who discuss the different behaviours and rituals that may occur in different professional settings, such as politics, the law and health care as well as building on the modalities in Hargie (2011) and offering a brief overview of both approaches (linguistic, psychological, ethnological, functional etc.) and functions (memory, situation definition, identification, relationship, emotion, power, territoriality).

These different categorisations focus on the channels of transmitting messages. If we are to identify points of synergy with text-based models, we need to address the functional dimension of non-verbal metacommunication, since text-based paradigms seem to concern themselves largely with the point of the utterance, since in face-to-face interaction there is only one means – the voice.

‘Non-verbal communication is, by contrast, implicit and has a main focus on the emotional/relational aspect of communication’

Building on Knapp et al. (2013), and Burgoon et al. (1996) the following roles of non-verbal communication can be identified (a) as a substitute for verbal communication; (b) as an accompaniment; (c) as a modifier; (d) to indicate contradiction; (e) to manage speech and interaction; (f) to express emotions; (g) to manage or negotiate relationships; (h) to declare identity (both personal and social) and (i) to contextualise the interaction by creating a social environment for the interaction.

If we take these purposes and compare them to Wilmot's episode/relationship model, we can see that the use of gestures to manage turn taking can be seen as episodic, as could the conscious use of a range of cues (intonation, facial expression, gesture or a combination of these) to indicate irony or contradiction. Gestures used to accompany content such as enumeration of examples or beating for emphasis, can similarly be considered as episodic. Other elements are more obviously relationship focused, though, as with all attempts to arrive at clear-cut categorisations, some seem to fit into both camps. The choice of dress could both make statements about identity and status as well as indicating a compliance with the conventions of the episode. The creation of a context may have the effect of providing an environment in which to maintain the relationship as well as the background for a successful completion of the episode itself.

Perhaps the focus on non-verbal communication and the interest in body language per se is one of the contributors to the division between verbal and non-verbal metacommunication in the literature. Possibly this division is further cemented in the mind by assertions that in face to face interaction the majority of the message is carried by intonation, facial expression and body language, (Watzlawick, 1967; Mehrabian, 1972; Guerrero and Floyd, 2006). While the exact proportions and percentages differed, there was a consensus that non-verbal communication, particularly visual, carried the bulk of the message within monolingual settings.

Just as the interest in non-verbal communication may have contributed to a separation within the literature, so perhaps the influence of ICT system design (Yetim et al. 2005) may have contributed to the focus on text. The apparent absence of the need to address face-to-face communication of necessity results in a consideration of principles from the point of view of text alone and thus takes the debate away from the notion of complementarity.

Congruency versus incongruency

The above-mentioned division into verbal and non-verbal takes on an extra dimension when the notion of congruency is at play. Congruency is defined as when verbal and non-verbal elements operate

in harmony. According to Rasheed et al, *'Congruent messages are ones in which the verbal and non-verbal components relay the same message'* (Rasheed et al. 2011, p. 44).

Consequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, confusion arises when the non-verbal message or cue is inconsistent with the verbal one. *'Incongruence is a type of communication in which (overt) verbal and (covert) non-verbal messages do not match'* (ibid: p. 143).

Although this statement shows a division of input sources by identifying conflicting information, it also challenges the established dichotomy of the verbal, non-verbal divide, since the credibility of a communicative act depends on the interpretation of both elements *at the same time*.

This binary approach is used by Rasheed et al. (2011) to give credence to what is perceived as more credible when what is said and how it is said appear to diverge. *'In circumstances of incongruence, non-verbal expression assumes prominence and generally is perceived as more trustworthy than the verbal content'* (ibid: p. 43).

For example, when in response to a statement, an interlocutor replies, *'How interesting'* using an intonation pattern that does not necessarily indicate interest, this may generate uncertainty. Is the

speaker being ironic and will that be understood even when both interactants share the same discourse conventions? Is the speaker simply being polite or do they need time to reflect on the proposition? Is the speaker not given to explicit displays of emotion?

Such a need for simultaneous processing of a range of elements is perhaps paradoxically seen in Wilmot (1980). Although he coined the dichotomy of episodic versus relationship, as mentioned above, he equally asserts that these divisions do not represent the complexity of the communicative act and emphasises the mutual existence of all elements. *'Humans send messages and metamesages that provide a congruent package for interpretation. The message content is framed and interpreted by the metacommunication, the relationship dimension'* (Wilmot, 1980, p. 62).

This view is echoed by Brooks and Heath (1993). *'The process by which information, meanings and feelings are shared by persons through the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages'* (Brooks & Heath, 1993, p. 7) and more recently by Stewart (2010), stating how interpersonal communication involves both verbal and non-verbal processing which together create meaning.

Divergence can take various forms.

'While at a textual level it is possible to clarify, to seek clarification, and consequently renegotiate understanding, this tends to be more complicated with non-verbal communication'

As well as having been seen as the incongruity or noise between verbal and non-verbal cues it is also manifested in the way that interactants identify and repair misunderstandings. While at a textual level it is possible to clarify, to seek clarification, and consequently renegotiate understanding, this tends to be more complicated with non-verbal communication.

For example, if one interlocutor expresses themselves passionately and emotionally on an issue close to their heart and their counterpart remains silent and is seemingly emotionless, is this because they are not interested? Could it be that they feel uncomfortable and don't know how to react or that they are simply processing the enormity of what they have just heard? If the first speaker feels that their counterpart is disinterested, how might this mismatch between verbal and non-verbal cues impact on the relationship and what they might go on to say? Such a situation would be challenging to repair, since to ask directly *'Do you care?'* or *'Are you at all*

interested?' or to declare *'You don't seem interested'* could expose vulnerabilities and result in a breakdown in, rather than a maintenance of, the relationship.

Alternatives to Dual Paradigms

Some scholars have gone beyond these binary paradigms to suggest different ways of approaching metacommunication.

From a descriptive perspective, Shevchenko (2015) posits four categories of a metadiscursive group within communication: discourse processing, strategies and tactics; genre and stylistic features; phatic metacommunication; turn-taking. In doing so, she emphasises the complementarity of message and metamessage.

Considering the impact of metacommunication on interaction, Hoppenbrouwers and Weigand (2000) view metacommunication from the perspective of breakdown and use van Reijswoud's (1996) model of three layers: success, where everything is going well, discussion,

where communication requires immediate repair, and discourse, where the parameters of the communication itself need to be established. This is connected to an ante (pre-empting potential misunderstanding) and post (effecting repair after breakdown) where the discourse level is likely to occur before an interaction – such as setting the conventions of a meeting or a class whereas discussion and success levels would typically occur during the course of any event. Hoppenbrouwers and Weigand (2000) make the assertion that the very existence of a toolkit implies the realisation that breakdown will inevitably occur (Hoppenbrouwers & Weigand, 2000, p. 132), a sentiment echoed by Scollon and Scollon (2001) and found in Winogard and Flores (1986) who point out that the differences in discourse conventions between interactors to a large extent contribute to misunderstandings. They note, *‘Conditions of satisfaction are not objective realities, free interpretations of speaker and hearer. They exist in listening, and there is always the potential for a difference among the parties. This can lead to breakdown [...] and to a subsequent conversation about the understandings of the condition’* (Winogard and Flores, 1986, p. 66).

Silence

The juxtapositions and their overlaps described above can also be found in a consideration of silence as a metacommunicative tool. One way of

looking at silence would be to define it in juxtaposition to sound. *‘Speech and silence are complementary forms of communication; each acquires significance from the other’* (Jain & Matukumalli, 2001, 3 p.248). In this perspective silence can only exist within a context of other acoustic information and its presence as a punctuating device when taken in conjunction with the context in which this occurs is what leads to the creation of meaning. It is this meaning that is often so varied.

We often hear comments about people who don’t talk much as being uncommunicative, and numerous scholars point to a difference between a western generally negative view of silence and a positive interpretation in Asian communities (Jain & Matukumalli, 2013; Bailey, 2000) and Finland (Carbaugh, 2005; Petkova, 2015). Yet the very fact that in English some people qualify the nature of a silence (unanimous silence, pregnant silence, companionable silence, diplomatic silence, giving someone the silent treatment etc.) indicates that silence has both positive and negative connotations, is open to a plurality of definitions and is understood in a variety of ways.

There appears to be no consensus on a definition of silence. Is it the absence of sound? Is it the absence of any communicative cue? Is it as Jaworski (1997) claims that a pause, an unanswered

‘Metacommunication is often open to interpretation and dependent on context and this is also the case with silence’

question, ignoring a greeting, avoiding a topic of conversation or irrelevant chatter, or a frozen gesture of an actor are all different instances of silence?

Can it be defined by length? Does a very brief, momentary pause in a conversation have the same meaning as a lengthier one? Is there any different significance when we ask for a one minute or two minute silence? What are we communicating when we maintain silence? The discussion of the nature of meaning of silence reflects to some extent Bateson’s division of message and metamessage. In certain specific contexts silence has a precise meaning. Saville-Troike’s (1985) example of silence indicating acceptance or rejection of a marriage proposal in Japanese or Igbo respectively would indicate a propositional message as would the frequently documented use of silence to indicate disagreement but to avoid uttering words of disagreement (Nakane, 2012; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). Yet

a silence can also be metacommunicative, indicating, for example the nature of the relationship between speakers, as the examples of types of silence given above indicate. Metacommunication is often open to interpretation and dependent on context and this is also the case with silence. We can see this in expressions such as *‘Her silence spoke volumes’*, showing a common understanding of a meaning clearly being conveyed, yet the absolute precision of this meaning not being described.

As with metacommunication and non-verbal communication, attempts at describing silence in communication have opted for a variety of different perspectives that appear to be largely concerned with what it is or what it does.

When considering how silence is used, one criterion is the size of the space left without sound between interlocutors. Nakane (2007) offers a summary of 7 stages from micro units to macro units: (1) Intra-turn, (2)

Inter-turn, (3) Turn constituting with illocutionary force, (4) temporary silence of individuals who do not hold the floor in interaction, (5) an individual's total withdrawal of speech in a speech event, (6) silence of a group of participants as a constituent of social/religious events, (7) discourse suppressed by a dominant force at various levels of social organisation (Nakane, 2007, p. 7).

However, a simple identification of length does not address the nature of silences in the discourse. Nakane (2007) himself appears to correlate length of pause with function, but, as Tannen (1985) states, the perception of the silence will vary from individual to individual and from group to group. How long, for example, does a silence need to be for it to be interpreted as a discontinuation of talk rather than a 'pause' or a 'lull'? Then there is the question of what the pause or lull is for. Is it to reflect before answering an awkward question? Is it a period of contemplation before choosing the right term in a lecture? Is it for humorous effect? Or to indicate disagreement, hostility or discomfort? The precise understanding of this will inevitably depend on other metacommunicative cues and the context and relationship within which they occur. Silence, then, is a purposeful part of a discourse chain as much as intonation, body language, syntax and context. Indeed, as Nakane (2012) states, silence appears to have almost as many functions as speech and that

the multifaceted and ambiguous nature of silence is what leads to the variety of understandings and misunderstandings.

According to Adam Jaworski (2000), '*Silence is an important communication tool*' (Jaworski, 2000, p. 113). It allows the interlocutor to arrive at certain perceptions about, in Wilmot's (1980) terms, both the episode taking place and the relationship. Accordingly it can be described as '*an absence of something that we expect to hear on a given occasion when we assume it is there but remains unsaid*' (Jaworski, 2000, p.113). It is the expectation of a certain utterance that reflects Wilmot's (1980) analysis. The occasion can be seen as the episode, but for us to have an expectation there needs to be an understanding of the context, the role of the speaker and the relationship between them. For example in an exchange between a couple during an argument:

A: *Well, are you going to do this or aren't you?*

B:

The silence could be taken as meaning 'no' since it would be expected that neither side would back down at that particular point.

Jaworski (2000) goes on to describe silence in broader terms, with perhaps broader categories than Nakane's

(2007) and suggests it is a metaphor for communication as a whole, bringing together in one concept diverse linguistics, social, cultural, spiritual and metacommunicative phenomena.

Nakane (2007) also considers silence from a purely functional perspective and offers a summary of it as a whole communicative act that reflects Jaworski's (2000) work as well as parts of the models of Knapp and Hall (2013): (a) cognitive, including pauses, hesitations for cognitive language processing; (b) discursive, including marking boundaries of discourse: (c) social, for example negotiating and maintaining social distance, maintaining power through avoiding certain content of verbal expressions and use of politeness strategies (negative, positive, off-record); (d) affective for example as a means of emotion management (Nakane, 2007, p. 11-12).

Further to this, Watts (1997) focuses on conversational analysis and looks at how interactional silences are part and parcel, rather than separate elements, of a metacommunicative act and are used by participants to manipulate their own and others' conversational status within a group, the decision to say or not to say something, when to speak and when to refrain from speaking can have an enervating or denigrating effect on the speaker and the listeners with respect to their respective positions of power,

domination and control. Gilmore's (1985) study of pupils' behaviour in the classroom is an indication of how silence can be used as a way of regaining a form of power. The use of silence as a form of defiance can be memorable and reflect Codoban's (2013) view of digital metacommunication as being the parts that stay in the mind.

For Braithwaite (1990) '*Silence can be seen as one among a range of strategies or options that can itself constitute, or be part of, 'a way of speaking'*' (Braithwaite, 1990, P. 321).

One of these strategies is its use in face threatening or face saving behaviour. This will depend on the nature of the relation between the interactants at the moment of the communicative act. In the state of clear, unambiguous relations, silence can be seen as a mark of the stability of the relationship. For example, in a situation between good friends who sit overlooking a view without the need to talk, this would be an example of what the English language describes as 'companionable silence'. However, when the interpersonal bond is weakened – for example after an argument or where there is uncertainty about the roles each person is expected to adopt – , silence can be used as a manipulative resource (Watts *ibid.*) or a serious face threat (Sifianou 1997). A struggle for domination in face-to-face interaction can involve the use of silent

pauses (Watts *ibid.*) silencing alternative voices and points.

The use of silence as a bargaining tool is well documented (Nakane, 2007) and often in the context of business communication (Meyer, 2014; Lewis, 2006) but such examples seem to indicate that a specific interpretation is possible – in the case of bargaining, silence creates embarrassment and provokes a better offer from the opposite number. Such scenarios, whilst possible, do not reflect the ambiguity that silence can have.

The following exchange comes from the author's personal experience of a bus journey where to request the bus to stop, a passenger has pressed a button. The conversation takes place between the male bus driver and a young, female passenger who has moved to the front of the bus near the door.

Driver: *Do you want to get off the bus here?*

Passenger:

Driver: *Hello. Do you want to get off here?* (said more loudly)

Passenger:

Driver: *Oh well then...* (He drives past the stop and on towards the next one.)

Passenger: *Why didn't you stop?*

Driver: *I asked you if you wanted to get off.*

Passenger:

Driver: *It's a request stop, you have to press the button.*

Passenger: *I did press the button.*

Driver: *No you didn't.*

Passenger: *Why are you getting so angry?*

Driver: *I'm not. You have to press the button if you want me to stop. You didn't and I asked you if you wanted to get off. I asked you twice and you didn't answer me.*

Passenger:

(Someone else presses the bell for the next stop.)

Driver: *You see, you have to press the bell.*

Passenger:

(The bus reaches the next stop and the passenger gets off.)

In this exchange the passenger's silence can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Initially, she may not have heard the driver. She could have been thinking of something else and simply not heard. She could also not respond as she felt it was obvious that she

‘As well as being a tool of power, silence can also create involvement between communicators and, far from being a source of disquiet, it can be a means to cement a relationship’

wanted to get off at the next stop by virtue of the fact that she had made her way to the front of the bus.

The later silences appear more calculated and as such to have a predetermined communicative function. They could be designed to show dissatisfaction or upset that she has to go further to the next stop. They could also be seen as a way of maintaining status. Also, by not entering into an argument, the situation is diffused. A third interpretation might be that the passenger wants to maintain her position that she did press the button, but that she knows it won't change anything, or a fourth might be that she knows she was wrong and says nothing as a strategy for saving face. One can only make sense of the silence if all the other elements are jointly taken into consideration.

As well as being a tool of power, silence can also create involvement between communicators and, far from being a source of disquiet, it can be a means to cement a relationship. The image of an elderly couple sitting side by side in

peaceful silence would be an example of this. In a different environment, Jaworski (2003) cites the musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson's use of silence as a musical tool and for dramatic effect (for example indicating turn taking in a conversation to illustrate closeness or alienation) as well as a means of building a bond between the performer and the audience in that it creates extra levels of understanding and can take on a range of metaphorical meanings in performance.

So as we can see, silence can frequently speak volumes as long as it is deciphered simultaneously in conjunction with the various other constituent parts of the complete interaction. As with other elements of the metacommunicative canon, the messages silence can communicate, such as the mood of the interlocutors, or the functions that it can perform are universal. However, the precise understanding will be determined by the relative conventions within a particular language community or social group. Silence is, then both universal and culturally, pragmatically, semantically and ritualistically relative.

Potential benefits of communicative literacy

Taken from the micro back to the macro, if silence can perform so many functions, the list of possible uses of metacommunication in general (verbal and non-verbal) appears almost endless. Likewise, the fields in which it can be applied can only be limited by the number of different interactions that can take place in face to face communication of any form, personal or professional: therapy, intercultural dialogue, mediation, conflict resolution, business negotiation etc.

We have seen that functions include establishing, building and maintaining relationships. For example in an initial business meeting, the chair's opening line may be, *'Hi guys, we are here today to pick each other's brains about...'*. This immediately establishes an egalitarian, inclusive relationship that will contain sharing and mutual respect for each other's views. This could be supported by non-verbal cues such as a soft spoken tone, eye contact with everyone, relaxed body language and smiles, a circular seating arrangement of chairs at the same level equally spaced, the provision of water and soft drinks, notepads and pens or pencils for everyone, informal dress code etc. All these cues and messages help create the desired atmosphere of breaking the ice, and indicate the nature of the management style as well as establishing the relationship

between management and workforce, the focus being on the complementarity of various elements of communication and how they all correlate.

If communication, as has been suggested, is conceived as comprising message and metamessage, then verbal cues such as prefacing a joke by *'Don't take this seriously'* for example, can prevent offence or misinterpretation. Cues can be used for clarification, damage limitation and repair. For example, *'Just to let you know that I didn't like the tone of what you said yesterday. Did you really mean that?'* This can be an overture that as well as revisiting a previous conversation allows for repair to take place. However, any of these cues, by themselves is not enough to achieve the desired outcome. What is needed is understanding of how the cue correlates with context, relationship between speakers and other various aspects of a communicative act already discussed.

At a non-verbal level, if a lecturer sees students yawning and says, *'It seems that you aren't that interested in this so let's move on to something else'* it could be simply that students are tired from working or that the room is hot and stuffy. It could also be a reaction to the class taking place early in the morning or late in the day. Once more, the entire meaning can only fully be ascertained when connected with other sources of information.

At the relational level, metamessages can be a tool for reinforcing good practice and encouraging others to refrain from bad practice. For example, punctuating conversation with expressions such as '*I really like it when...*' or '*I hate it when....*' or '*you are so good at...*'. Such expressions would indicate the nature of the relationship as being sufficiently open to allow such comments to be made without causing offence. This could be reinforced by body language such as frowning or smiling, by the proximity of the speakers, by the volume of voice, the intonation and possibly touch. These cues will indicate the intensity and degree of gravity of the situation, which in turn could be supplemented by the location. A different understanding would arise if this took place in a quiet corner of a café, in someone's living room or across a classroom. As we can see understanding involves the simultaneous processing of information from a whole range of sources and perspectives.

If, as Bateson (1972) suggests, a metamessage is anything that offers a context that would help interlocutors make sense of a communication event, then using expressions to mitigate bad news and cushion the blow such as '*What I'm going to say is going to come as a shock to you*' or, '*What I'm going to say will have a huge impact on your future*' frames the message that is being conveyed. Again this can be supported by a severe tone of voice,

eye contact or lack of it, a possible pause before imparting the content. The nature of the content could be underpinned by the distance between the interlocutors as well as the location. However, the effectiveness or otherwise of such prefacing will only be realized when considering the interaction a more macro level in conjunction with the news that follows, how it is expressed, the past relationship between the speakers, the location and time of the conversation etc.

When applied to professional environments, the gains from a holistic approach to communication are possibly more tangible.

In the field of conflict management, cues can be seen from the outset. The choice of venue (neutral or otherwise), and the choice of participants (number and status of delegates for each side, third parties, interpreters, observers etc.) send an array of messages. Framing the meeting as not about apportioning blame but finding common ground before seeking solutions and as such placing the emphasis on relation building as well as the content, combines the two elements of the content/relationship paradigm. Equally the choice to take a distance from the content and to focus on relationships, for example by having a welcome dinner or a museum visit, denotes a purposeful communicative decision. Similarly the agenda, whether or not turn taking protocols are established

and how long each intervention by whom should take as well as agreeing on content (what should and shouldn't be discussed) form part of the communicative context. A holistic approach to this suggests an endeavor to avoid any potential pitfalls and enhance mutual trust and understanding. Here we see Hoppenbrouwer and Wiegand's discourse level applied beyond discourse.

In the field of child therapy an analogue approach may often lend itself to this particular context, where the focus tends to be as much on body language, silence, pauses, eye contact, demeanour, tone and pace of delivery as it is on the digital content. There is a large body of literature in this field that focuses on the relational aspect of the client relationship in terms of building trust etc. so bringing together the relation and content divide into one communicative act. Metacommunication cues can also feature in the use of objects, pictures, games, location and colours of the space (what constitutes a child-friendly environment). The presence or otherwise of a third adult may have a communicative effect on the interaction in making the child comfortable and so more forthcoming. The use of these tools indicates the value of a conscious multi-faceted approach to communication

As a tool of negotiation, an awareness of the impact of metacommunication

on the interaction is likely to be more conducive to achieving the purpose of the meeting. The use of inclusive registers such as '*compromise*', '*together*', '*joint*', '*mutual*', '*we*', '*us*', '*open to suggestion*', establishes a positive relationship and suggests flexibility and the prospect of reaching a mutually satisfactory conclusion. This can be reinforced by non-verbal cues ranging from venue to body language, agenda, number and nature of participants etc. An awareness of cultural differences, adapting to and accommodating them implicitly (such as catering for all dietary needs) sends the right messages about meeting the interlocutor half way and starts a relationship on the right note and has the potential to further cement it.

Each of the paradigms discussed above partly promotes better understanding of a communicative act. However, as Wilmot himself suggests, it is by embracing all of them at the same time that we can begin to arrive at a holistic and comprehensive appreciation of the complexities of any interpersonal communication. This can be extended to include intercultural dimensions as set out by Garcia Jimenez (2014) in her creation of a Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication, bringing together culture, dialectal tensions and metacommunication. Indeed, this awareness may have potential benefits in both enhancing understanding and

‘As a tool of negotiation, an awareness of the impact of metacommunication on the interaction is likely to be more conducive to achieving the purpose of the meeting’

in ensuring that the intended message is the received message and that the desired outcome of any interaction is achieved.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined the role of meta-communication in discourse from a variety of perspectives and heard from a range of expert commentators. We began by noting although meta-communication is recognised as an integral part of human interaction its myriad influences have led to a fragmentation of the discipline as a standalone phenomenon. Examining the influence of just three aspects of communication, verbal, non-verbal and contextual, we established that a range of communication devices combine to make up what we understand as meta-communication. In particular, message and metamessage, episodic and relationship communication, digital and analogue, congruency and incongruency as well as verbal and non-verbal communication are all dualities which play a part in communication affect the way a message is delivered and received.

Above all, we addressed the role of silence as a vital meta-communicative tool which can contain overtones of character, culture and context. As Nakane (2007) writes silence can be considered a metaphor for communication as a whole, bringing together, linguistic, social, cultural and spiritual elements.

From this brief discussion, we can note that to confine communication to the dual paradigm of message and metamessage is possibly in itself limiting. Similarly, it seems that the focus on duality occurs at the expense of the question of functionality of communication. The range of purposes and sources of both the creation and interpretation of messages rather comply with Levinson & Holler’s (2014) concept of communication as a multimodal phenomenon. Added to this is the notion that communication is no longer seen as a linear event, but more as a fluid, cyclical process involving constant reappraisal and adjustment. As such, it follows that if we are to be effective decoders we need to pay continuous attention to all sources of input at

the moment of interaction. Although there may be variations in emphasis between textual, non-verbal and contextual elements (noting that contextual can be viewed as an actual physical location, past exposure to similar situations, the current past and future relationship between the interlocutors and any agenda that either party may have) to omit any one element could well compromise full understanding. This in

turn raises the question of how to train such competences since it is the application of these features that carries with it the potential to improve communication globally. The training of communication could benefit from a less apparently à la carte approach where different phenomena are considered in isolation and where there is an apparent lack of appreciation of the constant interrelation of all elements.

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