Communication Breakdown : A Pragmatics Problem

Meenakshi Harraw Verma

“Communication works for those who work for it.” John Powell.

The statement suggests that communication, in spite of being a natural activity, encompass a lot to be learnt. It is rightly said that it takes only two years to learn how to ‘speak’ but a lifetime to learn ‘what to speak’. Communication is an unavoidable and irreversible process. A communicator must know how not to indulge in miscommunication and incomplete communication. Though everybody knows the importance of effective communication skills and also that today’s businesses demand people with good communication skills, yet very few people are gifted with perfect speech and writing skills. That is why, companies face a mammoth problem while recruiting managers and often lament that their managers do not have good communication skills, and this is one reason for not delivering the desired results. Managers themselves complain about communication breakdowns as one of their most important problems. It is experienced not only in business but in other real-life situations too that -

i) The message is not transmitted exactly the same as it is in the mind of the communicator, and
ii) Message sent by the encoder is not received by the decoder as intended primarily by the encoder.

Though with the invention of the satellite communication today has become much faster and easier, but at the same time it has become more complex. The new high-tech devices are a great help to us to communicate with anybody, anywhere and at any time. But the problem of communication breakdown is not yet resolved. It is only due to communication problem that people face conflict within their work group. They often have to have a second thought before they speak and revise the written document many a time before sending. Every day, people are trapped in misunderstanding and misinformation. This is a kind of ‘negative communication’ which in turn leads to strained relationships at work and at home as well. Effective communicators are rated as people who leave positive influence on others by their verbal and non-verbal communication skills and motivate them to keep their spirits high. They use certain tactics and they are quick in their perceptions about people, places and objects. They develop this quality gradually by their sharp observation, assumptions, interaction and expression of speech. At the same time, there are people who fail to learn this quality of being excellent communicators face problems. “Failure to communicate” is an unnecessary problem which not only makes the communication complex rather fills up the life with many complexes.

*Meenakshi Harraw Verma, Associate Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Invertis University, Bareilly-243123 (U.P.) India. Email – meenakshi.v68@gmail.com.
WHERE DOES THE MESSAGE GO WRONG:
There are various levels at which the message goes wrong and causes bad delivery. These arise at the -

Sender's level
Receiver's level
Transmission level
Feedback and reaction level

‘NOISE’ is one factor due to which the message goes wrong or is not received by the decoder as sent by the encoder. NOISE is not only the disturbance caused by the sound. It is to be viewed with a broader perspective. NOISE is a technical term that applies to all forms of communication, including writing. Illegible handwriting and wrong spellings can well be taken as the examples of NOISE. NOISE means any disturbance occurring in the process of communication. Example – “Thesefacebook notifications mails can add great noise after mixing up with some important mails on you inbox, so let’s discuss how can you avoid getting these notifications in your inbox.” [1]

But, NOISE cannot be considered the only factor for the communication breakdowns. Because there are instances when in spite of the NOISE the messages are received properly. Human beings have been gifted with the cognitive domain which tells them what is being said and what is being communicated. Communication as a process is generally discussed through the Message Model.

THE MESSAGE MODEL OF LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION:

Communication as a Process of Coding and Decoding:

To share our thoughts and ideas with others, we adopt a process of coding and decoding. It means that to communicate, we need two or more persons. One plays the role of the speaker and the other plays the role of a listener. The idea to be communicated generates in the mind of the speaker and then it is encoded mostly in a language. This idea is further transmitted through a channel i.e. the vocal-auditory path through the sound waves. Let’s see –

\[
\text{SENDER} \rightarrow \text{IDEA} \rightarrow \text{ENCODING} \rightarrow \text{MEDIUM} \rightarrow \text{CHANNEL} \rightarrow \text{RECEIVER} \rightarrow \text{DECODING} \rightarrow \text{FEEDBACK}
\]

Process of Communication

In order to determinate message, the Message Model of Communication assumes that

- The language is unambiguous.
• What the speaker is referring to is determined by the meaning of the referring expression uttered.
• The communicative intention is determined by the meaning of the sentence.
• Speakers only speak literally.
• Speakers only speak directly.
• Speakers use words, phrases and sentences only to communicate.

This model also accounts for certain commonsense features of talk-exchanges. It predicts that –

➢ Communication is successful when the hearer decodes the same message that the speaker encodes; and it predicts that communication breaks down if the decoded message is different from the encoded message.

➢ It suggests that the speaker and the hearer must use common symbols for communication. If symbols are different, the message will not be communicated.

➢ It portrays language as a bridge between the speaker and the hearer which carries the message from the encoder to the decoder. Individual’s ideas are communicated by the commonly used sound symbols.

PROBLEMS WITH THE MESSAGE MODEL:

Firstly, the language is not always unambiguous. Expressions can be ambiguous too. It becomes difficult for the hearer to assess which possible meaning is intended by the speaker. E.g. Visiting doctors can be expensive. Intended meaning may be different according to the contexts –

Visiting the doctors can be/is expensive. (Going to a doctor for treatment).
The visiting doctors can be/are expensive. (Doctors who make their visit when called).

Secondly, underdetermination of reference by meaning is another problem with the Message Model. The Message Model does not supplement any mechanism for successfully recognizing the meaning generally conveyed by a phrase or specifically conveyed by the speaker. A particular phrase may be used to convey different meanings. E.g. ‘the half naked fakir’ generally refers to a fakir who is dressed half naked. But, it changes the meaning if the hearer knows that it is used to refer to Mahatma Gandhi.

Thirdly, Speaker’s Communicative intention is not clearly expressed by the Message Model, which is a part of the message communicated, e.g. Let the books be on the table. It can be a suggestion, a request or on order depending upon the speaker’s intentions according to the circumstances.

Fourthly, The Message Model does not account for the fact that humans speak non-literally, i.e. we may not mean what our words mean. Irony, sarcasm and figurative language such as metaphor are a few examples.
Fifthly, the Message Model does not account for the fact that humans speak non-literally and indirectly, i.e. a speaker can use the very same sentence to convey different messages depending on the context. E.g. *I shall be late today*. It can be a request to a colleague to seek his help to accomplish certain important task in your absence. It can be information to the boss who has assigned you some work outside the office. You want to let him know that due to the assigned work you will be late in the office. So, the meaning of an utterance depends on the context in which it is being uttered.

Next, in spite of the words and phrases there are institutional acts, which do not require any communicative intention to be recognized by the hearer, as they communicate specific meaning, e.g. marrying, baptizing or firing someone. From our social context we know that two persons are married, a baby is baptized and an employee is fired.

The Message Model suggests only an idealized form of communication which hardly ever takes place.

**Pragmatics & Communication**

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning. Pragmatics explains how language users are able to overcome apparent ambiguity, since meaning relies on the manner, place, time etc. of an utterance. [2] It studies how the transmission of meaning depends not only on the linguistic knowledge (e.g. grammar, lexicon etc.) of the speaker and listener, but also on the content of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, the inferred intent of the speaker, and so on. [3] The ability to understand another speaker’s intended meaning is called pragmatic competence. Pragmatics was a reaction to structuralist linguistics outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure. It expanded upon his idea that language has an analyzable structure, composed of parts that can be defined in relation to others.

Pragmatics is the study of language use. Since a sentence plus its context of use can be called an utterance, Katz’s suggestion amounts to the idea that a pragmatic theory is a function whose domain is the set of utterances and whose range is the set of propositions.

It takes into account the following aspects

i) The study of the speaker’s meaning, not focusing on the phonetic or grammatical form of an utterance, but instead on what the speaker’s intentions and beliefs are.

ii) The study of the meaning in content, and the influence that a given content can have on the message. It required knowledge of the speaker’s identities, and the place and time of the utterance.

iii) The study of implicatures, i.e. the things that are communicated even though they are not explicitly expressed.

iv) The study of relative distance, both social and physical, between speakers in order to understand what determines the choice of what is said and what is not said.
From linguistics point of view ‘communication breakdowns’ is a study of pragmatics i.e. the
study of language use in relation to language structure and context of use. Pragmatics studies
the relations between signs and their human users. It discusses how users interpret or add some
other information to the linguistic signs. Speaking a language involves producing sounds for
others to hear, understand and act upon. How is it possible for a speaker to put thoughts into
words and for a hearer to understand them? This is not a trivial accomplishment rather a rich
and subtle system of principles. It is an important fact about human beings that virtually all of
them learn to speak a language in a given environment. Learning language provides humans
with the most pervasive characteristic of human social interaction that is to talk. Talking
together is so pervasive that human beings hardly find it remarkable. We talk to particular
persons, sometimes to anyone who will listen; and when we cannot find anyone to listen, we
even talk to ourselves. It is very common and effortless to talk but to share your beliefs in a
well defined social situation using language is a very complex task. It is so complex that it
generally puts people in the situation of communication breakdown. In spite of the fact that all
components required for successful communication are present, humans fail to communicate
successfully. Why? Because communication does not always proceed in a straight line. It is a
sequence of inferences which works altogether. If any step is missed, it may lead to break the
communication.

THE INFERENTIAL MODEL OF LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION:
Pragmatics as a field of study has propagated the Inferential Model of Linguistic
Communication, which is an improvement upon the Message Model. The Inferential Model
connects the message with meaning by a sequence of inferences. Linguistic communication is
successful when the hearer recognizes the speaker’s communicative intention and draws the
meaning out of the utterance. The system based on inferential strategies avoids the limitations of
the Message Model and incorporates the notion of communicative intentions and beliefs. It also
accounts for literal, non-literal, direct and indirect communication.

Intended Inference and Shared Beliefs:
Psycholinguistic analysis of language suggests that human beings when learn to speak a
language, also learn to communicate in that language. This process involves acquiring a variety
of shared beliefs or presumptions, as well as a system of inferential strategies. Successful
communication occurs when presumptions and inferential strategies are taken together. It
suggests that communication is more than a process of coding and decoding. The connection
between sound and the message is inferential. Besides, people of the similar community and
religion have a lot in common to share. They understand their rituals, practices and saying from
their culture. Communication is thus a system of ‘intended inference and shared beliefs’. The
Inferential Model, further, discusses the following features.

Communicative Intention: The speaker chooses words to use in a particular context so that the
hearer can recognize his communicative intention, which means the hearer must understand
the meaning of the utterance by the speaker. If the hearer fails to recognize the speaker’s
intention, communication is not successful.

Contextual Appropriateness: A particular utterance is successful in a particular context.
Context plays a very important role in identification of the meaning of an utterance. If an utterance is made out of the context, it becomes meaningless. Without meaning no communication completes. On the other hand contextual inappropriateness may miscommunicate facts or information.

**Meaning** : The speaker can mean what he says. Or he may not mean what he says. Or he may mean more than what he says. It can be understood by defining Denotative meaning, connotative meaning and implicit meaning. Denotative meaning means what is said is meant too i.e. a direct utterance. Connotative meaning means the utterance has a different meaning e.g. figurative language or proverbs. Implicit meaning means the utterance means a lot more than is said. If the boss tells his employee angrily to leave the room (in a context when he has been issued a termination letter) it implies that the employee is being asked not to come again. The hearer derives the meaning out of the utterance by using his presumptions, the context and the speaker’s reference. Meaning is largely dependent on the situation, context and relationship between the speaker and the listener. If the employee is not issued a termination letter than the meaning of the same utterance may vary. It may be that the boss does not want to talk to him any more, or the boss is angry on somebody else and has to make an urgent confidential call and he wants the employee to leave his room.

Geoffery Leach [4] classified ‘meaning’ into seven types :

i) Conceptual Meaning – Conceptual meaning refers to the denotative meaning. It deals with the core meaning of the expression. It is the direct expression of the conceived idea.

ii) Connotative Meaning - Connotative meaning is the meaning which is attributed to a given expression by its users. As conceptual meaning is the part of what is conceived, connotative meaning is the part of what is perceived.

iii) Stylistic Meaning – Stylistic meaning refers to the meaning which emerges in a particular socio-cultural backdrop and encompasses certain features of the language being used by its users. E.g. the figurative language may be specific to the people of a particular culture.

iv) Affective Meaning – Affective meaning comprises the personal feelings of the speaker including his attitude to the listener and to the topic of discourse.

v) Reflective Meaning – Reflective meaning is the effect of one meaning on another meaning of the same word.

vi) Collocative Meaning – Collocative meaning refers to the meaning which is acquired by a word under the influence of other words which co-occurs with it.

vii) Thematic Meaning – Thematic meaning is conveyed by the structure of the discourse where concepts like topic of discourse and focus of discourse are identified. Topic refers to the theme i.e. what or who we talk about. Focus is the new information we give to the listener.

**Presuppositions** : The speaker assumes certain context before uttering and refers to certain idea/object/person etc. These assumptions which are made before speech are known as presuppositions/presumptions. These presuppositions are made on the basis of the existing knowledge of the speaker. The listener infers the meaning with his own presumptions or beliefs. These may be similar to the speaker’s presumptions/beliefs or different as well. It means the idea in the mind of the speaker is developed on the basis of his presuppositions.
Speakers’ Reference: While speaking the speaker refers to a particular idea/object/person presupposing that this will enable the hearer to understand his talk. If the speaker realizes that the listen is unable to understand him, he tries to clarify or describe his message using a number of references to make the listener understand him. If he fails to do, may be message remains incomplete or not understood by the listener properly.

Linguistic Competence: The message to be communicated also depends upon the linguistic competence of the speaker and understanding of the same message depends upon the linguistic competence of the listener at the same time. Lack of knowledge of particular vocabulary may hinder the speaker to convey his meaning exactly the same as it is conceived in his mind. At the same time, in spite of the knowledge of the same language, the decoder may not understand the speaker’s message because he lacks knowledge of particular words.

Inferential Strategies:
As the Inferential Model of Communication incorporates the idea of context, meaning and presuppositions, it also suggests the strategies which infer during the process of communication. Each strategy contains a pattern of inference and an appeal to various presumptions and shared contextual beliefs. The speaker presumes certain helpful things about the hearer and the strategy adopted by the speaker helps him convey his message to the hearer, and the hearer with short effective pattern of inference understands ‘what is being uttered’ and ‘what is being communicated’. Thus, presumptions, utterances and strategies taken together provide successful linguistic communication. [2]

Strategies to Communicate:
Direct Strategy: This enables the hearer to access the meaning from the utterance of the speaker as it is said. For this he needs to listen to all words carefully. If he misses some words, he may not be able to access the meaning and in that case communication will break down. Recognition of an utterance on the basis of some presumptions will enable the hearer to understand even an ambiguous utterance, e.g. Give me a cheap gas can. Here, the ambiguity is whether the speaker wants a can (for gas) which is cheap or he wants a can for cheap gas. But from the knowledge of the world and the given context, the speaker presumes that the hearer would understand which meaning is intended to be operative. If his presumption proves wrong, he may not be successful in communicating his intention.

Literal Strategy: From the contextual appropriateness the hearer recognizes that the speaker is speaking literally. When the talk is literal, it is direct, too. Our words and our expressions coordinate in this situation. The speaker makes effective use of his body language to convey his message correctly. The coordination between the words and the expression is referred as the Congruent Clusters. In case of incongruent clusters, the literal strategy of communication will not take place.

Indirect Strategy: Indirect strategy is used by the speaker when he means something else than what he says. The hearer also understands from the contextual inappropriateness that it is not possible for the speaker to speak directly and he recognizes what is being communicated. If the hearer fails to do so the communication breaks down.
Non-literal Strategy: Non-literal strategy is used in non-literal communication, which suggests that the speaker means other than what he says and it is not possible for him to speak directly and literally. His words carry some extra message. The contextual inappropriateness and the background knowledge leads the listener to understand that the speaker is speaking non-literally. He recognizes the speaker’s intention and understands his message.

Linguistic communication is successful if the listener recognizes the speaker’s communicative intentions. It depends upon the inferential strategies leading from the utterance of an expression to the listener’s recognition of the same. Mastery upon the strategies can reduce the chances of communication breakdown. Thus, to become an effective communicator and avoid communication problems, study of the inferential studies and pragmatics equips the speaker to choose appropriate language and style to develop content according to the context and listener to recognize and understand the speaker’s intentions.

Works Cited: