Communication Theory

Mapping a diverse field

By

Karsten Pedersen

Communication Theory: Mapping a diverse field

By Karsten Pedersen

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Preface

This is a book about communication theory. It is a book in which I attempt to discuss the conditions for communication theory and for discussing communication theory.

I think my interest in communication and communication theory was first kindled, when some of my colleagues in the English Department of a business school said that they did not understand why we would want to develop a master's programme in communication, because 'language is communication'. That made quite an impression on me, but it also got me to think. Because these people were right, but they could not have been more wrong, if they tried. They were right, because, language IS communication, but they were wrong, because communication is not language. It is so much more than language. Communication is an immensely diverse human activity that even defies definition.

Therefore, writing a book on communication and communication theory is an interesting activity that I have had much fun with and that has given me quite a few new understandings of what communication is and does and of how we can describe communication in the most adequate terms.

One such understanding that I arrive at in the book, is that perception is individual and not part of the communication process. To me, that is quite a revelation and helps me understand communication even better.

I use Robert T. Craig's article "Communication Theory as a Field" (Craig 1999) as a sounding board in large parts of the book. When a colleague first showed me Craig's article, I was convinced that he had made the ultimate map of communication theory. Now I know that he

had not. Craig's metamodel and his identification of originally seven traditions of communication theory, is not the end of discussion. Craig is not right. And that is what is so formidable. Because Craig is not right, his article is the perfect point of departure, the perfect sounding board, and the perfect guide when you want to discuss communication theory.

In the book I discuss the same aspects of communication theory from a variety of angles, that means that I will sometimes repeat discussion, but from different perspectives and with different purposes. Basically, I try to show as many aspects of communication theory as I possibly can. And in so doing, I hope to help others see how communication practices and communication theory alike are always and will always be aspects or (perhaps more aptly put) perspectives of communication, reflecting certain theoretical and practice oriented points of view.

My own conclusion to the process of writing this book is that communication practices and communication theory are perspectives on human communication. And when we understand which perspectives we choose and which we do not, we become so much wiser on the complexity of communication.

Also a few thankyous are in place. To my sons, Thomas and Tobias. The former for the friendly competition in the writing process. It spurred me on and was instrumental in finishing the book. And the latter for a wake-up call regarding the density and brevity of my manuscript. My book is so much better, because of that.

Lastly a thank you to my wife, Jeanne. Not because you did anything to do with the book. Not at all. But because you are the best life partner I could wish for.

Roskilde, February 2025

Karsten Pedersen

Chapter 1

Conditions for Communication Theory or Not Knowing When to Leave the Party

There are few solid facts about human communication. One fact that I think we should all agree on is this: Communication can only be produced and understood from the inside out.

And that goes for all understandings of communication. We can only perceive of the world from our own perspective. If communication is seen as a transmission process, all we can do is understand what is transmitted from our own perspective, if communication is a selection of understanding, then that selection will be based on our own perspective, etc.

That sounds very simple: I understand you based on my own perspective on the world, such as my past experiences, personal relations, etc. But this understanding of communication will render all communication efforts impossible, because if our perspectives are personal only, there is no way I can connect to you through communication. On the other hand, we know that communication does take place and does work, so there is more to it than just this personal understanding. We do not live in separate worlds even if our understanding of the world must be individual and separate.

And this is where communication theory comes in. Communication theory is our way of trying to deal with human communication from a theoretical stance and the way we approach or understand communication will be reflected in the way in which we understand and present communication theory. Different theories will highlight different aspects or perspectives of human communication. It is very much

like standing on a hill, overlooking the landscape. Looking in any specific direction will make it impossible to look in other directions at the same time. But not being able to see parts of the landscape does not mean that it is not there, it just means that you are looking in a different direction.

As we stand back to back on the top of a hill, I see the most beautiful sunset and you see some children play in a park. Such are our perspectives. We do not see the same things. But we would never say that the children or the sunset does not exist. We know that there are things beyond the grasp of our eyes, and we do not normally doubt each other's experiences. Therefore, you believe me when I say what I see, and I believe you, when you tell me what you see. Under normal circumstances, we believe what people relate to us what they experience. Also, under normal circumstances, we know and accept that using different optics will yield different results. In my example here, we know and accept that if you look in a certain direction, there are phenomena that you cannot see. I know that when I look at a building, there are trees behind me that I cannot see. I also know that no matter how hard I look at the building, only turning my back on it will lead me to see the trees. But I do not have to deny the existence of the trees, just as I did not have to doubt you, when you said you saw children. We know and accept as a fact that we cannot take in the entire world at once.

And this is where the comparison with communication theory could come to an end, because sometimes theories have a really hard time accepting or even understanding that there is a world beyond their perspective or even that their perspective is a perspective and not a wide-angle lens, seeing all there is to see.

We see this illustrated in Myers' criticism (Myers 2001) of Robert T. Craig's influential Communication Theory as a Field (Craig 1999).

Myers finds that subsuming all seven traditions under one metamodel as "a coherent field of metadiscursive practice, a field of discourse about discourse with implications for the practice of communication" (Craig 1999, 120) is problematic because it privileges a constructivist view of communication theory and thereby reduces non-constructivist traditions to second-rate theories. Myers claims that Craig's model "[…] imports reconstructed versions of its alternatives, animating the hollow bodies of those theories while depriving them of the paradigmatic souls" (Myers 2001, 221).

Myers' criticism takes as its point of departure the differences in the various traditions' ontological and epistemological stances, and he claims that the metamodel does not consider the epistemology and ontology of all the traditions, thereby privileging a constructivist position.

Myers says that: "Though a constitutive metamodel well may allow all to participate in this party of discourse, it seems particularly ill suited to inform any of the participants when it is time to leave" (Myers 2001, 226). But this criticism, in my view, is a very good example of how we actually **can** discuss the foundations of communication theory without finding ourselves at a party where the guests have to be told by the host when to leave; they know that themselves as Myers' own protestations show.

Myers seems to take epistemological and ontological boundaries as a given, rather than flexible constructs that can be amended when needed. This latter point is highlighted by Griffin when he discusses the possibility of climbing the fences separating the traditions (Griffin 2012, 47).

Perhaps the metamodel is not at all necessary and I will discuss that later. But that does not mean that the identification of the traditions is rendered obsolete. The traditions and the relations between the traditions (Griffin 2012, 47) can be very helpful in the discussion of

communication theory as illustrated by Cooren, Rusill, Bergman, Graves, Vlăduțescu, Craig and Xiong, and Pedersen (Cooren 2012; Russill 2007; Bergman 2008; 2012; Graves 2019; Craig and Xiong 2022; Vlăduțescu 2013; Pedersen 2022, 9–18, 103–8). Even Myers' own article is very useful in the understanding and discussion of the seven traditions.

In my view Myers misses some important points in his criticism:

1) Using a metamodel does not reduce anything and does not change the paradigms of non-constructivist traditions.

   Of course, it is true that by suggesting a constitutive meta-model, Craig subsumes non-constructivist approaches to communication theory under the metamodel. But that does not silence any criticism that one might have vis-á-vis the model. We can still say that the model is wrong and criticise its foundations.

2) The metamodel (like anything constructivist) is not the truth and changes nothing in the relations between different theo-retical approaches (traditions).

   The metamodel is a platform for discussion as Myers' contri-bution illustrates. It is not, and as far as I can see, does not purport to be, the truth and that means that if you find it problematic or even harmful, you are more than welcome to ignore it. And if you don't find your brand of communication theory represented in the metamodel, why should you not?

3) Any model is a theoretical construct and can therefore be crit-icised, altered and amended.

   This is what I try to illustrate below. Pragmatism finds its

place in the metamodel by way of discussion with and criticism of the metamodel. Ventriloquism finds its way into the model, by reinterpreting and perhaps even enveloping it in its own terminology.

Even if we could argue that a theory or theoretical approach (or tradition) has a limited perspective and is not able to see or describe the entire world, this argument could be lost on proponents of certain disciplinary approaches and this we see in the discussion between Pablé (Pablé 2017) and Craig (Craig 2019).

Basically, Pablé says that we do not need a metamodel, because we have semiology. Pablé's argument is of course more elaborated than my representation of it. Pablé says:

> … *perhaps we don't need communication theory to be a 'field'. What we need is a theory of human communication founded on a solid semiological basis, one that favours the 'terra firma' of personal experience over metaphysical speculation, i.e. one that dispenses with deus ex machina devices, like the collective linguistic system or the intersubjectively available sign, conjured up in order to salvage the received notion of communication as a social phenomenon (Pablé 2017, 65).*

Why we would want to talk about personal experience as 'terra firma', I do not know. It seems to overlook exactly the individual human experience that we are not alone in the world and run the risk of discussing signs based not on the mutual interpretation and the common understanding of signs, language and communication, but on idiosyncratic interpretations of the world, leaving little place for alternative understandings, let alone the possibility of challenging received understandings of certain words or ideas.

Craig's response to this is that while semiology does represent an interesting approach to communication theory, there is no way that it can cover all the aspects of human communication, even if that seems to be the claim that Pablé makes:

> *My praise of the integrational model of communication admittedly may be more annoying than gratifying to the committed integrationist. The upshot is to welcome integrationism to the pluralistic constitutive metamodel as one theory among others in the semiotic tradition, whereas Pablé (2017: 58) argues that integrationism, although admittedly a semiotic theory, cannot be placed in the metamodel at all because it properly displaces the metamodel and stands alone as the fundamental theory of communication. To accept this claim we must agree that integrationism is not just a valid theory of communication but exclusively so: 'the only perspective available to those with a commitment to understanding human communication' (Pablé 2017: 65). In reply, I argue that integrationism is a useful but limited perspective and that its claim to exclusive validity should be rejected by communication theorists (Craig 2019, 103).*

In my view, Pablé's mistake here (and I do think it is a mistake) is to think that language is communication. Or perhaps even worse: to think that communication is language. Because where we might say that the former is true, it is somewhat more problematic to argue the latter, simply because the notion of language as communication is a limited perspective. Not because semiotics or semiology does not address the social aspects of language, but because it has neither the inclination nor the vocabulary to deal with much more than what Craig refers to as the "[i]ntersubjective mediation by signs" (Craig 1999, 133,136).

Another mistake that Pablé makes is that he equates theory with truth. By that I mean that even if Pablé is correct in assuming that an

analysis or description of human communication must take its point of departure in a personal experience, that is not the same as discarding the fact that we do live in societies and that there are other people whose presence and viewpoints we constantly adapt to and whose opinions we constantly refer to. And in order to deal with that, we need to discuss communication and communication processes from a variety of perspectives.

Like Pablé I see communication as an individual or personal endeavour that needs to be addressed in communication planning and communication analysis alike, but that does not mean that planning, analysing or describing communication processes from various theoretical perspectives is rendered obsolete. The fact that communication is personal, does not exclude the existence of shared signs or of shared qualities that make human communication possible. And in order to describe such shared qualities, we need a shared language so that we can address the commonalities from all the perspectives that we find relevant.

And so, we need metacommunication for at least two reasons:

1) To be able to show and address the differences between different approaches.

2) To have a vocabulary that goes beyond each of the communication theories out there.

Ideally, metacommunication will help us discuss the different perspectives in a manner that does not privilege any theory over another but will help us see which theoretical approach will be helpful for which purposes and will further help us see how different approaches can be fruitful in the exploration of human communication.

And it is to this end that Robert T. Craig, in a now classic text, proposed that we use what he calls a constitutive metamodel (Craig 1999). The metamodel is supposed to be an overarching model of communication (a second degree model) and is basically an understanding of communication as a constitutive activity. A constitutive metamodel is a model of communication that sees communication processes as social activities, communication theories as social constructs, and therefore also discusses communication from a constitutive vantagepoint.

Originally, Craig identified seven traditions (Craig 1999) and has later endorsed the inclusion of an eighth tradition (Russill 2007; Craig 2007; Bergman 2008; 2012). The number of traditions is not essential, but the discussion of how a tradition is identified and represented in the list of traditions is. Because otherwise with a metamodel we run the risk of misrepresenting disciplinary approaches to communication theory. And this is the criticism that we see from Myers when he says of Craig's original article:

> *Craig's practical discourse strategy would have us collect baskets of theoretical concepts ("vocabularies") that are simultaneously mutually (logically) exclusive and yet somehow productively coexistent: a Mad Hatter's tea party. Though a constitutive metamodel well may allow all to participate in this party of discourse, it seems particularly ill suited to inform any of the participants when it is time to leave (Myers 2001, 226).*

Essentially what Myers says here is that the fact that Craig's proposal is constitutive in nature is problematic because it privileges constructivist (constitutive) traditions of communication theory in relation to non-constructivist approaches. Therefore, the argument is, non-constructionist approaches are included in the metamodel on premises foreign to their own ontologies and epistemologies. And this is what is meant by 'not knowing when to leave'.

In the following I will discuss how it seems that the invitees, and even a late invitee such as the pragmatist tradition do seem to know when to leave. The two examples are the 1) pragmatist tradition and how Russill and Bergman try to come to terms with the metamodel, and 2) Cooren's reinterpretation of Craig's 1999 article and the seven traditions into his own approach to ventriloquism. In conclusion I will discuss these two approaches in the light of Myers' criticism.

The addition of a pragmatist tradition to the seven traditions already identified by Craig was suggested by Russill (Russill 2007). Craig endorsed the suggestion and amended his original take on the traditions so that there are now eight (Craig 2007).

Bergman discusses whether or not the aspects of pragmatism that Russill and Craig included in their understanding of the pragmatist tradition, are a relevant and useful representation of pragmatism and comes to the conclusion that it is not and proposes some amendments (Bergman 2012). Such amendments are important because as Bergman says,

> *… what may be at stake in this debate is how the very concept "pragmatism" is going to be understood and used in social-scientific communication studies (Bergman 2012, 2).*

It is not important to my argument to discuss whether Bergman or Craig is right. The important thing is that Bergman and Russill have heeded Craig's original call and taken it upon them to discuss if and how a theory or tradition can be sensibly included into the theoretical matrix created by Craig. Actually, what they do here is very much what Craig mentions as a possible reaction to Communication Theory as a Field:

> *The usefulness of the traditions for mapping the field can also be questioned. Particular theorists or lines of work—especially one's own!—can be hard to "place" in any tradition (Craig 2009).*

For a theorist to engage in a discussion from the point of view that they want to have their theoretical perspective represented in a more precise or appropriate way is very important for the discussion of what communication and communication theory is. And it is important from at least two perspectives. First of all, it brings the discussion forward and lets us discuss the boundaries between traditions and thereby help us to clearer definitions of the traditions while at the same time, perhaps making it clear that there are no well-defined boundaries. Secondly it gives voice to theorists from specific theoretical traditions (here pragmatism) rather than from communication theorist and can help the latter correct any misconceptions or even outright mistakes.

Cooren's approach to the seven traditions is somewhat different. He embraces Craig's proposal when he says:

> *In this article, I first propose to reinterpret R. T. Craig's (1999) call for a dialogue between communication perspectives as a formulation of design specs to which any constitutive model of communication should respond. I then propose to answer this call by metaphorically conceiving of communication as a form of ventriloquism, which translates our capacity to make other beings say or do things while we speak, write, or, more generally, conduct ourselves (Cooren 2012, 1).*

Then Cooren goes on to reinterpret Craig's seven traditions from the perspective of ventriloquism, underlining that this is just one way of doing it:

So my question is, ''Can we try to honor Craig's invitation?'' and, if the response is yes, as I think it should be, what could be one possible response? Not THE response, of course—that would go against the conditions of an open dialogue, debate, or discussion—but at least a response that could certainly be then criticized, attacked, or even derided if this is what it takes to provoke a collective reflection. This is what I propose to do in this article (Cooren 2012, 3).

One could imagine this exercise to be performed from an infinite number of theoretical stances (Pedersen 2022) in order to show how different perspectives render different analytical results and different discussions, and this disciplinary reinterpretation of the seven (eight) traditions is highly interesting, because it can help us understand what the different traditions can do and how they can interact.

Much like the pragmatic discussion touched upon above, Cooren's reinterpretation gives the communication theoretical community or communities the opportunity to discuss the boundaries between the traditions, making it possible for us to climb the fences separating the traditions (Griffin 2012, 47) and in the process learn more about the traditions, the inner lives of the traditions and the interfaces between the traditions.

It should be clear from this discussion that I am in Craig's camp in the sense that his original call for a discussion of what constitutes communication theory resonates with me. I am still not convinced that we need a metamodel in order to have that discussion, but that is a different matter entirely.

As I see it, there are three stances (Pedersen 2022, 103–7):

1) Let us talk about communication theory across traditions and disciplines as we have always done. This is very much Myers' and Pablé's view.

2) The discussion of the traditions is important and can help us in a cross-fertilisation of the field of communication theories. But we need to do it from the vantage point of our own theoretical perspective. This is where we find Cooren.

3) The metamodel is extremely helpful but needs dialogue with all the different theoretical perspectives. Here we find Bergman and Russill. And of course, Craig.

At any rate, it does seem that we all know when to leave the party:

1) Pablé and Myers (from different perspectives) do not want to go to the party.

2) Cooren wants the traditions to make it their own parties.

3) The pragmatists want to redecorate their part of the room.

To insist that you have found the one and only true theoretical approach to communication theory, communication analysis and communication studies is not conducive to any fruitful discussion, and such a position, rather than bring new insights, will stifle the debate. To insist that we do not know the truth and that there is not one single path to theoretical and analytical truths, is to insist on the discussion and to open one's mind to different and perhaps even contradictory theoretical beliefs.

The party is on! You are more than welcome.

I Skipped Ahead, Here Is the Real Chapter One: What Is Communication?

I cannot believe I did that. I cannot believe that I missed a beat and skipped ahead without discussing what communication is. This is a book on communication theory, so let us see if we can home in on what communication is.

In Encyclopedia of Rhetoric Craig defines communication like this: "… the transmission or exchange of ideas" (Craig 2001a). In this understanding, communication is a social phenomenon that involves sharing thoughts or ideas between humans.

Griffin offers us what he calls a "working definition" and says that "Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response" (Griffin 2012, 6). The central word here, is 'elicit', because what is the process behind something being qualified to 'elicit' an activity? Taking it a bit further, we can say that 'elicit' points in the direction of systems theory and Peircean semiotics. By that I mean that eliciting lies not with an object or action, but with the individual's perception of said object or action.

Luhmann says that humans do not communicate "I would like to maintain that only communication can communicate and that only within such a network of communication is what we understand as action created (Luhmann 1992, 251)." From this, it is difficult to deduce what communication is, but perhaps it is close to the Peircean idea of a sign as something that is a sign to somebody in some respect (cf. below). But Luhmann goes on to define communication like this:

Just like life and consciousness, communication is an emergent real-
ity, a state of affairs sui generis. It arises through a synthesis of three
different selections, namely, selection of information, selection of
the utterance of this information, and a selective understanding or
misunderstanding of this utterance and its information (Luhmann
1992, 252).

Again, I think, it is close to Peirce's understanding of the sign. Espe-
cially the (mis)understanding of an utterance seems to fit nicely with
Peirce's idea. This means that meaning or information is not trans-
mitted but created in the individual mind of a human. There is no
exchange, just, in Luhmann's terms, the emergence of meaning.

I hope that it is clear that defining communication is not an easy task.
Perhaps it is not possible and perhaps it is not necessary:

If the past two decades of communication scholarship have stum-
bled onto anything significant at all, it is the reality that there is no
single, absolute essence of communication that adequately explains
the phenomena we study. Such a definition does not exist; neither is
it merely awaiting the next brightest communication scholar to nail
it down once and for all (Slack 2006, 223).

Slack's point here underlines why there can be so many approaches
to communication and that they all lack the ability to embrace all rele-
vant aspects of human communication. How then, are we supposed
to make sense in the vast forest of communication theories and its
spiny undergrowth?

One way is embracing the differences in order to keep the discus-
sion going. If no one theory seems able to satisfy all the analytic and
descriptive needs we have (Craig 1993), we have to combine our way
to a comprehensive understanding of communication and commu-
nication theory. Later (Chapter 3) I will discuss Craig's metamodel

from different perspectives (Craig 2001b; 2015; 2019; 2007; Craig and Muller 2007; Craig 1978; 2005; Craig and Xiong 2022; Craig 2019; Pablé 2017; Pedersen 2022; Bergman 2008; 2012) as I find Craig's identification of seven communication theoretical traditions rather useful as a stepping stone for the discussion of communication theory as well as for the discussion of the relations between different perspectives on communication theory.

So, instead of endeavouring to define communication, I would like to show and discuss how different perspectives on communication theory can help highlight different aspects of the activities we talk of as communication. I have chosen to structure my discussion along the lines of the discussion by Ruth Finnegan (Finnegan 2024). The reason why I want to follow Finnegan's approach is that she tries to make communication as broad as possible in order to cater for as varied a palette of human interaction as possible:

> *This, in other words, is a broad view of communication which includes all the communicating channels – auditory, visual, kinesic, proxemic, tactile, olfactory, whatever. Humans are not solely intellectual or rational creatures, and their communication through human-made artefacts and through their facial expressions, dress, or bodily positionings are as relevant as verbally articulated sentences. Human beings, in short, draw on a multitude of resources to interconnect with each other, and in so doing interactively create their human world (Finnegan 2024, 8).*

So, Finnegan sees communication as an interactive process using input from almost any source we can think of, and that looks very much like Peirce's definition of the sign: "A sign … is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1931, 2.228).

Sign theory is a specialised understanding and description of part of human communication, but the definition of the sign is interesting here, because it is so close to Finnegan's understanding of human communication as a multisensory and interactive process. But note how Peirce's sign definition is not interactive (if you see smoke as a sign of fire, smoke does not act, it is just there and you interpret it, so that it becomes a sign of fire), so even if there are similarities, Peirce's understanding of the sign and Finnegan's understanding of communication are not the same. I will get back to a discussion of the differences and similarities of these understandings later in this chapter.

Finnegan asks four questions about human communication that I will discuss here in order to try to show how we can talk about communication. But before I begin, I would like to emphasise that when I talk about communication, I only talk about human communication. And that I, even if it is important in all communication processes, do not consider perception in and of itself to be communication. In that understanding, the example with smoke as a sign of fire, is not communication in the sense that I use the term.

But on to Finnegan's four discussion points:

Communication as the message (Finnegan 2024, 9)

The point of departure here is an understanding of communication as the transportation of a message from a sender to a receiver. And Finnegan's main point here is that regarding communication as the sending of messages is to reduce communication to an absolute minimum and thereby not seeing the vast diversity in communication and media forms and formats. I would say that even if I agree with Finnegan in this matter, there could be good analytical reasons for such a reduction, especially if the purpose of description or analysis is to follow how a specific message travels from initiator to receiver.

This could be the case in strategic communication processes where focus quite naturally is on the message. Also the origins of Shannon and Weaver's model (Shannon and Weaver 1964) underlines how a specific need can foster specific approaches to communication and communication analysis.

But the fact that it can sometimes be helpful to analyse communication campaigns from a rather limited perspective does not mean that we have to understand communication in the same way. All it means is that for analytical purposes, limitation can be helpful, and that looking at and following what happens with a message as it gets picked up by media and individuals, can be a very informative and illustrative activity.

A case in point, could be the discussion of the status of the rhetorical situation (Bitzer 1992; Vatz 1973). In short, the discussion deals with whether or not situations have something in them that forces a communicator to communicate (Bitzer's point) or if situations do not have this exigence in them (Vatz' point).

Let us see how Bitzer and Vatz argue their respective cases:

> *The exigence may or may not be perceived clearly by the rhetor or other persons in the situation; it may be strong or weak depending upon the clarity of their perception and the degree of their interest in it; it may be real or unreal depending on the facts of the case; it may be important or trivial; it may be such that discourse can completely remove it, or it may persist in spite of repeated modifications; it may be completely familiar – one of a type of exigences occurring frequently in our experience – or it may be totally new, unique (Bitzer 1992, 7).*

So, according to Bitzer, the exigence in a situation is rhetor's under-
standing of the situation that makes it necessary for rhetor to let their
voice be heard.

Vatz' reply looks like this:

> *It is a fitting of a scene into a category or categories found in the*
> *head of the observer. No situation can have a nature independent of*
> *the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with*
> *which he chooses to characterize it (Vatz 1973, 154).*

Even if the two quotes sound very much the same and seem to place
the understanding of exigence with rhetor or sender, Bitzer goes
somewhat further when he says:

> *[…] to say that rhetoric is situational means: (1) rhetorical discourse*
> *comes into existence as a response to a situation, in the same sense*
> *that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a*
> *solution in response to a problem; (2) a speech is given rhetorical*
> *significance by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given*
> *significance as answer or as solution by the question or problem; (3)*
> *a rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition of rhetori-*
> *cal discourse, just as a question must exist as a necessary condition*
> *of an answer; (4) many questions go unanswered and many prob-*
> *lems remain unsolved; similarly, many rhetorical situations mature*
> *and decay without giving birth to rhetorical utterance; (5) a situa-*
> *tion is rhetorical insofar as it needs and invites discourse capable*
> *of participating with situation and thereby altering its reality; (6)*
> *discourse is rhetorical insofar as it functions (or seeks to function)*
> *as a fitting response to a situation which needs and invites it. (7)*
> *Finally, the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same*
> *sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls*
> *the solution. Not the rhetor and not persuasive intent, but the situ-*

ation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity—and, I should add, of rhetorical criticism (Bitzer 1992, 5–6).

Let us try to go through Bitzer's claims here:

1) It is quite reasonable to see any attempt at communication as rhetor's or sender's reaction to something

2) Also, it seems reasonable to say that by reacting to something, rhetor/sender gives that something pertinence

3) But to say that a rhetorical situation must exist in order for rhetor to begin saying anything is just a circular argument and the example with the question, suggests that it is not possible to answer somebody's questions without them asking or without them posing a grammatically well-formed question

4) What Bitzer says here is that even if a situation opens itself to communication, this openness does not lead to communication in all cases. This insight underlines some of Bitzer's own points, but also a kind of common knowledge that not all opportunities are seized and not all questions answered. To me that is a very important part of human communication; we do not always choose communication

5) I am not sure I understand what Bitzer expresses here. To me, it is very much the same as what we saw in 1). Because when we answer a question or react to something, we alter the situation. On the other hand, Bitzer's point that (rhetorical) communication alters the world/situation is important in the understanding of what communication is and does.

6) Do we not always seek to give a fitting response? Is that not what all responses are about? I would think that Grice's con-

versational maxims (Grice 1989) as well as the principle of rel-
evance (Mercier and Sperber 2011; Sperber and Origgi 2005;
Sperber and Wilson 2005; Blakemore 1989) could help us un-
derstand that fitting responses are responses that make sense
in the situation.

7) To me this is the most controversial part of what Bitzer says
not only because it takes away agency from rhetor, but es-
pecially because it seems to undermine any decisions to not
communicate even when Bitzer himself says that when the
situation is over, so is the impetus to speak, but if the impetus
is external to rhetor, then the choice to speak or not to speak
"the rhetorical response" is not only out of the vocal chords of
rhetor, but must also be outside the mind of rhetor, simply be-
cause it is a decision made not by rhetor but by the situation.

My critique of Bitzer is two-fold. First, he does seem to contradict
himself, because either the situation dictates rhetor's utterances or
not. Rhetor cannot both not talk and be compelled to talk by the situ-
ation. If the situation dictates rhetorical utterances, then rhetor cannot
choose not to say anything. And if rhetor chooses not to speak, then
that choice must come from the situation. Second, Bitzer seems to
overlook the fact that there is no empirical way to find the element
that causes the exigence.

My critique is not far from what we find in Consigny's discussion of
the differences between Bitzer and Vatz.

> Bitzer's rhetor does not possess a special capacity which distin-
> guishes him from other problem-solving experts; he has no special
> power of disclosing problems in novel indeterminate situations. Nor
> does Vatz's rhetor possess require this capacity for discovering such
> problems, for he is completely free to create "problems" at will. Vatz's

rhetor has means of working through and responding to the recalcitrant particularities of situations, and Vatz provides no means to distinguish relevant problems from those imaginary or hypothetical ones the rhetor merely "invents" (Consigny 1974, 180).

To me it is clear that Consigny has a point in his distinction, but unfortunately he seems to suffer under the misunderstanding that there is a difference between 'relevant' and 'imaginary' problems. Because just as Bitzer has no way of empirically defining the rhetorical situation, Consigny has no way of distinguishing between the nature of problems. And that means that we are back to the quote from Vatz:

It is a fitting of a scene into a category or categories found in the head of the observer. No situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it (Vatz 1973, 154).

Basically, what Vatz says is, is that there is no situation unless somebody sees a situation. And that also means that the individual determines whether their problems are relevant, because if a problem is relevant to me, it is a relevant problem. Who else can decide what is relevant other than the individuals themselves?

In the case of the discussion of communication as a message, my conclusion is that if the prospective rhetor/sender finds there is a reason to communicate to the world, they will do so. And this view goes beyond regarding communication as a message and must be valid for all kinds of reasons to communicate: If an individual feels an incentive to communicate, they can choose to communicate if they think it serves some purpose. It follows from this, that if the incentive to communicate comes from within, so must all understanding of the human condition. And that is what leads us to begin to discuss what we see or understand as communication, and that is what I will do in the following section.

Communication as signs and codes (Finnegan 2024, 13)

Basically, this is a discussion of semiotics understood as communication. And as Finnegan points out, to understand all human communication in the light of semiotics is to translate all meaningful human activities into language (Finnegan 2024, 13–15). Similarly to the discussion of communication as message, I would say that even if semiotics can be very helpful in understanding how and what humans understand, when we communicate, translating or even reducing all meaningful human activities into a form of language might not be relevant or even useful in all cases.

Finnegan has a point in dismissing the semiotic claim or understanding that anything that we can use for communication, can be seen as a kind of semiotics:

> *But using "code" and "sign" for all forms of communicating loses the distinction between these more explicit systems and the less standardised (if nonetheless effective) conventions and thus give the impression that all human communicating belongs to the former type (Finnegan 2024, 14).*

Such a semiotic reduction reduces not only human communication, but also the explanatory powers of semiotics in the sense that it seems to claim that there is no communication beyond the sign. And that is a mix-up of the fact that semiotics does seem to be a very versatile vehicle for analysis and the idea that all communication analyses are best performed as a semiotic analysis.

Finnegan further problematises the semiotic, or structuralist approach, of not only being too abstract, but also of basically inventing meanings, when none can be deduced: