AN "ACT" BASED THEORY OF COMMUNICATION: FIRST PRINCIPLES

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As a communication theorist, my long-range goal is to construct communication theory in the "grand" tradition. Quite simply, I hope to develop a theory of human communication capable of applying, in precise and interesting detail, to such diverse areas of study as public speaking, discourse analysis, the oral interpretation of literature, rhetoric and composition as taught in Speech and English departments, argumentation, persuasion, group-problem solving, and even linguistics. Such is the goal and the dream of a lifetime.

But, whatever its grander intentions, a theory cannot begin with grandiose concepts and principles. To be useful scientifically the theory must instead begin with precisely thought out fundamental concepts, clear statements concerning the key relationships among those concepts, and detailed descriptions of the essential principles that will be employed in treating the discovered data. Armed with such a system of concepts and principles, the theorist may then lay down the general foundations upon which all subsequent, grander and more detailed observations are to be based. The final task is then to relentlessly follow those specific concepts and principles wherever they may lead along the path toward ever grander systematic explanation—because that approach seems the only real way to test the capacities of a proposed paradigm to see what its inner strengths and weaknesses may ultimately be.

What system of concepts shall we employ? I have chosen as the main conceptual tool in building the foundations for my own theory of communication the philosophical system developed by Susanne K. Langer in her work Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling (1967, 1972). I believe that it, more than any other conceptual system with which I am familiar, has the power and precision needed to generate a theory of the magnitude I envision—and for which our discipline has so long sought. Therefore, all of my theoretical commitments on key intel-

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lectual issues in our discipline are being developed with Langer's philosophical constructs in mind. My purpose in this paper is (a) to outline some of the “first principles” of a theory of human communication which might be derived using the system of concepts developed in Langer's philosophy, and (b) to suggest some of the possible areas of immediate application that adopting the Langerian framework of concepts might make more theoretically accessible to us.

First Principles

1. All organic processes take the form of “acts.”

The most fundamental concept for a theory of communication developed from Langer's philosophy is her concept of acts. Addressing the question of how one best describes organic processes in order to discover their natural units and inherent dynamic characteristics, Langer concludes that any organic process we choose to study—from the most microscopic (such as cell division or a neuron’s discharge) to the most macroscopic (such as the wave of a hand or a person's life as a whole)—manifests a typical four phase “act” form composed of (a) the impulse (an initial building up of a tension or store of energy to be spent), (b) the rise or development (the progressive unfolding of the act along the lines foreshadowed and prepared for in the tensions built up in the impulse phase), (c) the climax or consummation (a turning point of maximum energy expenditure or activity arising from the original tension), and (d) the cadence, fall, or resolution (the decline of the act due to the exhaustion of the impulse's initial energy or tension, resulting in a return to relative quiescence). This general temporal form, said to underlie all natural units of all organic processes, Langer calls “the act concept.” And it is from the dynamic characteristics of organic processes as acts which Langer derives all the secondary concepts and explanatory principles of her philosophy.

As a practical outcome, if one adopts Langer's claim that all units of organic processes exemplify the act form, then it is clear a fortiori that every specific process we study in Speech Communication must also exemplify the act form. That is, Langer's is an empirical claim that all processes exemplify the act form, so there should be no exceptions. Thus, for example, we should expect to find the act form exemplified in such diverse phenomena as sentence production, listening, delivering public speeches, attitude formation and change, greetings, good-byes, and entire conversations, language acquisition, reading of texts, story-telling and jokes, language change, turn-taking, slips of the tongue, group meetings, rumor cycles, argumentative encounters,
and even essay writing. These, and all the other processes we study, should exemplify the life cycle represented by the act form if Langer's philosophy is to provide a genuine paradigm for theorizing in Speech Communication. For, only if they do manifest the act form does it make sense to suppose that Langer's more detailed principles and theories, derived as they are from the formal nature of acts, might shed light on the true nature of the processes we study.

Is there any evidence then that the processes we study indeed do exemplify the act form? There is, and it comes to us from all directions, almost without searching, once we have the act form to serve as a focus in reading the literature. What follows is a small sampling of some of the places I have found the act form exemplified in communication related literature.

The pattern of impulse, rise, climax, and fall is clearly evident in drama theory, where it was perhaps first discovered and noted by Aristotle. In the *Poetics* (1450b 23ff.), Aristotle says of tragedy that it is "an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude. . . . Now a whole is that which has beginning, middle and end. . . . a well-constructed Plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes . . . ." Subsequently he writes: "Every tragedy is in part Complication and in part Denouement. . . . By Complication I mean all from the beginning of the story to the point just before the change in the hero's fortunes; by Denouement, all from the beginning of the change to the end" (1455b 23-30). Here, in Aristotle, we have all the elements of the act form clearly described, with the tragedy having not only a clear beginning, middle, and end, but also rising action, a climax, and falling action.

Aristotle's analysis of the act-like elements of drama may also be found even today in books such as Dean and Carra's *Fundamentals of Play Directing* (1965), where they advise their students that "scenes that make up the rising action are minor climaxes" which build "until the major crisis is reached which propels actions directly to the main climax or obligatory scene. Out of this follows the denouement, resolution, or falling action to the end of the play, which is usually made up of diminished scenes" (p. 254). Once again the act pattern, and its vocabulary of rise, climax and fall can easily be seen in this treatment of play directing.

But the act pattern in literature is not limited to the genre of drama. In her book on *Poetic Closure* (1968), subtitled *A Study of How Poems End*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith generalizes the act pattern beyond drama, extending it to include all poetic forms (including non-narrative ones), writing: "The formula of introduction-complica-
tion-climax-resolution, most familiar to us in connection with dramatic structure, has its counterpart in any temporally organized work of art, from short story to sonata” (p. 35). The book subsequently analyzes the sense of poetic closure readers feel as being a function of the structure of the first three phases of the formula, arguing the thesis that “closure—the sense of finality, stability, and integrity—is an effect that depends entirely upon the reader's experience of the structure of the entire poem” (p. viii).

Smith's approach to poetic structure was foreshadowed over thirty-five years earlier in Kenneth Burke's *Counter-Statement* (1931). For example, Burke's "Lexicon Rhetoricae" begins: "Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires" (p. 124). Trying to locate the effects of literature in inherent properties of the mind, Burke writes: "Over and over again in the history of art, different material has been arranged to embody the principle of the crescendo; and this must be so because we 'think' in a crescendo, because it parallels certain psychic and physical processes which are at the roots of our experience" (p. 45). If Langer's theory is correct, what is at the root of our "psychic and physical processes," the reason we resonate to materials arranged to embody the principle of crescendo, the basis of literature's ability to arouse expectations and to fulfill them, is the fundamental dynamic of all organic processes—impulse, rise, climax and fall.

Turning from examples drawn from literature theory, we can find the act form exemplified in the theory of rhetorical elements as well. In *English Prose Style*, Herbert Read, writing on the sentence as a unit of prose style, says (1952): "The sentence is a single cry. It is a unit of expression, and its various qualities—length, rhythm and structure—are determined by a right sense of this unity" (p. 33). Then, in words which ring of the act form, Read explains the structure of two mainstays of the rhetorical analysis of style, antithesis and periodic sentences: "Antithesis operates by a tension or suspension between two ideas; the sentence becomes a balance between equal but opposite forces. A similar kind of suspense is maintained in period proper. A period is a complex sentence of which the meaning remains in suspense until the completion of the sentence" (p. 42). In each case the first portion of the sentence builds a tension which is only resolved with the consummation by its required counterpart.

This same pattern of establishing an initial tension or impulse which builds to a climax that resolves the tension may also be observed in the rhetorical analysis of units much larger than the sentence. For example, in her book on *The Rhetorical Act*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell describes one approach to organizing a speech (which she calls the

The story is an attempt to teach Nicholas about the nature of reality or truth as seen by his teacher. But the story cannot be reduced to an outline form. It is a nondiscursive or nonlogical structure, and it follows a different pattern of development. This pattern is followed by most stories, dramas, and jokes, and it looks something like this:

While Campbell limits this pattern to a single type of compositional construction, Robert Oliver, in The Psychology of Persuasive Speech (1957), recognizes that the pattern of impulse, rise, climax and fall must underlie all aspects of all persuasive composition. It is not simply the pattern of narrative, but of all spoken or written composition, if that composition is to seem to have any "life." Oliver writes:

As all persuasive speeches are bound together by their similarity of goal, so are they all marked by certain common characteristics. One of those is progression. A persuasive speech moves; it is going somewhere. It fails if it is static. The speech follows very much the same kind of course as a short-story plot. It may be diagrammed as follows:
The audience's thinking on the subject under discussion was progressing along the course A to A', but it was interrupted at the point marked B by the speaker's alternative proposal, much as the orderly course of the hero's life in a short story is deflected by the inciting incident. From that point there is a steadily rising action to the climax at B', when the speaker's proposal is mentally accepted by the audience. If the speaker continues to talk after that point is reached, the result is just as destructive to persuasion as it would be to literature if the author should go wandering on beyond his denouement. (p. 303)

The temptation is to simply continue quoting from area after area in which the units used for analyzing phenomena are defined in terms of action bounded by periods of relative quiescence, and the major descriptive terms within the unit are patterns of tension and release—Sarett and Foster on gestures in public speaking (1936); Brigance (1961), also on the phases of gestures; Mead's *Philosophy of the Act* (1938) which begins with the *impulse* phase and ends with *consummation*; Lacoursiere's theory of *The Life Cycle of Groups* (1980) and Knapp's stages of *Social Intercourse*, which run *From Greeting to Goodbye* (1978); and my own act-analysis of the structure of turn-taking, based on evidence from intonational patterns, gestural timing, and interactional synchrony studies (1981). But it is perhaps evident from this brief survey that many scholars in diverse fields have found it necessary and useful to employ in their own work descriptive vocabulary closely akin to that being systematically developed in Langer's philosophy. Having thus established at least some minimal presumption for continuing to develop communication theory within the Langerian paradigm, let me move on to describe several additional commitments entailed by the Langerian framework of concepts.

2. *Many explanatory principles may be derived directly from the act concept.*

The likelihood that there is a universal formal pattern underlying all organically based events is more than an interesting observation with no further systematic value. The universal pattern of impulse, development, climax, and fall provides Langer with the basis for deriving many powerful explanatory principles—principles which may be systematically applied in providing detailed accounts of specific features of the processes we study. That is, because the dynamic properties of acts themselves account for the general principles derived from them, and because the specific acts we study exemplify not only the act form but also these principles, the act concept may be used to generate explanations of the dynamics of the actual phenomena we
study. Since a detailed description of the key explanatory principles derivable from Langer's act concept is beyond the scope of this paper, readers interested in pursuing how these principles are stated and how they might be applied in reinterpreting specific data may want to read my discussion of conversational turn-taking (1981), my more general application of Langer's concepts in argumentation theory (1980), or my description of Langer's use of these principles to interpret the data on the origins of speech (1978).

3. The claim that "communication is a process" means that communication exemplifies the act form, and that it participates equally with all other organically based processes in manifesting the derivative explanatory principles.

While this statement merely makes explicit the conclusions entailed in the previous discussion, there are two reasons for doing so. First, since there are many other descriptions of "process" in the literature (e.g., Berlo, 1960, 1977), and those descriptions lead to very different theoretical consequences from Langer's, it is very important to be as clear as possible about the propositions to which Langer's philosophy commits one. Langer's characterization of processes differs radically, for example, from Berlo's (1960) characterization of them as having no fixed beginnings and endings, or predictable orders of development. While there may be no precise boundaries, "impulse, rise, climax, and fall" is both orderly and predictable. Similarly, to say that communication is a process is clearly not to identify "communication" with "interaction." Interaction, in the sense, say, of a conversation, is a highly complex act (i.e., it exemplifies the act form) composed of numerous sub-acts—greetings, turn-taking, and closings; questions, exclamations, and assertions; sentences, clauses, phrases, words, syllables, phonemes, and hesitations; postures, gestures, facial expressions, and gaze; attraction, impression formation, and empathy—all of which manifest the characteristic act form, but only some of which fulfill the definition of an act of communication (see below).

In other words, communication is only one among numerous elements composing an interaction—all of which exemplify the act form. This observation leads to the second point I wish to emphasize. While communication as an act shares the act form and basic explanatory principles with all other organic processes, it is also a special kind of human "activity" which differs significantly from all those other processes with which it shares the basic act form—and accordingly, it will require an additional special descriptive vocabulary and special set of additional principles to describe it as an activity which differs
from other organic activities. There is no conflict between saying that communication is an act-structured process, and also saying that it differs fundamentally from other act-structured activities comprising an interaction. Communication as an activity is as different from paralinguistics and kinesics as it is from digestion and respiration—all of which play their role in implementing a conversation as a complex act-structured interaction. A theory of the communication portion of an interaction will, then, specifically be a theory of communication as a particular type of act-structured activity. Since, within the Langerian framework of terms, I am committed to a very narrow definition of communication as an activity, the next basic principle specifies the definition of communication as a human activity within which I work.

4. Communication as a process is best defined as “the intentional transmission of ideas from one individual to one or more others.” If the intention miscarries, i.e., no idea ‘goes across,’ the individuals fail to communicate, though they may interact closely, elaborately, even violently” (Langer, 1972, p. 201).

While the tendency over the past thirty years has been to subsume more and more widely diverse phenomena under the label “communication,” and to consider them all “messages” or “message behavior,” a theory of communication developed from Langer’s philosophy would utterly reverse this trend. Communication is narrowly defined in Langer’s philosophy, not because she feels that none of the other processes we study are important, but because it is hopelessly confusing to do otherwise—a little like calling everything in a pharmacy “medicine” and then mixing all the “medicines” indiscriminantly together regardless of their chemical structures, primary effects or after effects, just because they all have in common that they at one time or another “help people get well.” Just because everything we do behaviorally has at one time or another “some effect” on someone else does not mean that those effects are all induced in the same way, or that everything that has an effect has the same “chemical” structure. Blushes, gaze, winks, gestures, and syntactically organized speech are all structurally differentiable activities and require separate labels to remind us that they also require separate theoretical accounts of their contributions to the development of conversational acts. To classify every component process which simply influences the course of an interaction as a “message,” or to call it “communication,” is to invite theoretical disaster. For classifying different things under a common label means, among other things, that the exact same theoretical statements should apply equally to all of them as a class. That this has not
happened in the course of the past thirty years suggests that the labelling of all behaviors as "messages" or "communication" has simply not served us well theoretically and should be abandoned.

Since a theory of communication acts should reveal not only how all instances of communication are similar among themselves, but also how, collectively, they differ from every other type of act, or from non-acts (e.g., clothing, space, etc.), influencing the course of a conversation, the next basic principle specifies what it means to "transmit" an idea.

5. Communication is the process of projecting one's ideas into a transmissible and perceivable form—i.e., into syntactically structured speech, or its surrogates: writing, sign-language, etc.

Central to understanding communication as a unique human activity is the concept of logical projection (Langer, 1967, p. 73ff). It is sometimes said that "meanings are not in words, they are in people." But a moment's reflection reveals that, until those meanings are projected outward from the person in some perceptible form, they are only in people. Those "meanings" are simply not available to others until they are put into a perceivable form (syntactically structured language) and projected outward from the body in speech or writing.

To communicate, then, is to perform the act of projecting one's ideas into a perceptible form for others to perceive and understand. The communicative act is unconsummated until someone else actually understands the idea that the communicator intended to project. If the communicatee does understand the idea which has been projected, then the joint act of communication has been consummated and comes to an end. If no proper understanding occurs, then the communication act remains unconsummated and no communication has occurred.

Employing terminology developed in Langer's theory of art, Karlyn Campbell has recently written (1982) that "To communicate, to act rhetorically, means that you initiate an act that someone else can translate into virtual experience. . . . To communicate effectively means that the image or idea created in your mind approximates the image or idea that the speaker or author wished to convey" (p. 8). This is very much the process I have in mind when I speak of the logical projection of ideas from one individual to one or more others.

Communication is always intentional in the narrow but important sense that the communicator is trying to put inner ideas into a perceptible form that makes those ideas available for others (even a lie is an attempt to put some idea into a projectable form). That there may be unintended consummations (as, for example, when someone over-
hears a conversation, or reads a private or secret document), or that there may be unintended effects of one's act of transmission (e.g., one's remarks induce the communicatee to do some undesirable action), is simply irrelevant to the definition of communication as an act. The only definitionally significant criteria for the term "communication" are that an idea be projected into syntactically appropriate form (i.e., a form appropriate for expressing the idea), and that the idea has been perceived and understood by another. All the other components of a typical human interaction, as important as they are to the course of human affairs, do not involve the act of projecting ideas into a syntactically perceptible form and thereby are not properly labeled communication within the Langerian framework of terms.

6. All other activities composing the complex act of conversation fail to operate on the principle of discursive logical projection and therefore require different theoretical explanations to account for their contributions to the phenomena of human interaction.

Once again, this principle simply makes explicit what is implicit in the previous paragraphs. Human interaction is an incredibly complex activity whose many component processes must be teased apart with surgical precision and given their own theoretical explanations if we are ever to understand the "whole" which ultimately interests us. For an interaction is a whole in much the same way that a person is—composed of numerous clearly separable and differentiable processes (digestion, respiration, circulation, etc.; communication, empathy, suggestibility, etc., respectively), each with its own internal dynamics and properties to be understood, each with its own specifiable relations to each of the other processes (digestion:circulation; communication: empathy), and each with its own characteristic relations to the person acting as a whole. And, just as different situations induce different patterns of relations among the various bodily processes (e.g., jogging increases circulatory and respiratory activity while decreasing digestive rates), so too do different situations induce different patterns of relations among the various component processes of an interaction (a lecture has a different percentage of communication acts, one presumes, than does a good-night kiss). It is in its potential for helping us tease apart all the component processes of interactions, and with conceptual precision rather than with impressionistic common sense, that the main virtue of Langer's conceptual system may ultimately reside. Thus, while the definition of communication is itself uncommonly narrow,
the grander synthetic vision such narrowing makes possible seems to me worth the price.

Conclusion

A brief summary of the central commitments of a new approach to developing communication theory cannot answer all the questions which must immediately come flooding to mind. Only future articles and further research can hope to answer those questions—each in its own turn, each depending for its solution upon preliminary theoretical decisions which become the premises for subsequent speculations. Theorizing is a systematic, and often, painfully slow process. So always, some questions must wait their turn.

What I have tried to do here is to present the most basic principles of the conceptual framework within which I presently work, and explain why I find that framework more promising than any other approach with which I am familiar. Human interaction, when we permit it to display its fullest array of component processes, is a mysterium tremendum. We are richly complex beings, and no amount of slicing and paring of that complexity can get all of human interaction to fit comfortably within such imprecise, global concepts as message, sender, receiver, and feedback. The profound advantage of Langer's conceptual system is that we need not try.

References

Press, 1957 [1942].


