

# ON COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION: A RESPONSE TO PAGE

James C. McCroskey

Page's attempt to reconcile the work in the areas of reticence and communication apprehension has a noble goal. It is one that Phillips and I have attempted in our personal interactions for the last decade. What makes this a difficult task is that the published works usually are at least two years behind the evolution of our thinking. If Page is to be criticized at all, it would be because he tends to assume that Phillips's thinking of a decade ago represents Phillips's thinking of today. It doesn't. On the other hand, my thinking concerning communication apprehension has changed comparatively little.

To begin, the constructs of communication apprehension and shyness or reticence are *not* isomorphic. My original definition of communication apprehension, "a broadly based anxiety related to oral communication,"<sup>1</sup> has been modified only slightly to read "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated (oral) communication with another person or persons."<sup>2</sup> The leading writer on shyness, Phillip Zimbardo, fails to provide a specific definition of that construct.<sup>3</sup> However, Girodo in his recent book on shyness suggests that it is a

composite of three elements: (1) undeveloped social skills, (2) social anxiety, and (3) mental bias (low social self-esteem).<sup>4</sup> Clearly, shyness is the broader construct. In the early days of his work, Phillips's definition of reticence and his approach to the problem was very close to that of communication apprehension. In fact, my communication apprehension construct grew directly from Phillips's work.<sup>5</sup> More recently, however, the reticence construct has become almost interchangeable with shyness. In sum, shyness or reticence is the genus, communication apprehension is one of its specie.

The above distinctions have not only been made definitionally, they have also been established empirically. The PRCA has been found to correlate with the early measure of reticence (beyond .80) employed by Phillips's associates. More recently, in unpublished research, my associates and I have obtained correlations only in the neighborhood of .50 between the PRCA and measures of both shyness and social anxiety.<sup>6</sup> Thus the difference in the constructs is not

James C. McCroskey is Professor and Chairperson of Speech Communication at West Virginia University.

<sup>1</sup> James C. McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety", *Speech Monographs*, 37 (Nov. 1970), 270.

<sup>2</sup> James C. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension: A Summary of Recent Theory and Research", *Human Communication Research*, 4 (Fall 1977), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Phillip G. Zimbardo, *Shyness: What It Is and What To Do About It* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publ. Co., 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Girodo, *Shy?* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> McCroskey, "Measures," p. 2. Although I was never a formal student of Phillips, I was completing my doctorate at Penn State when Phillips joined the faculty there. We officed next to each other and spent many hours in intellectual combat over the nature of reticence and his early approaches to the treatment of reticents.

<sup>6</sup> A portion of the research is reported by James C. McCroskey et al., "Teacher Communication Orientations and the Development of Communication Orientations among Elementary School Children: A Modeling Explanation," Paper presented at the ICA convention, Philadelphia, 1979.

simply semantic, it is a difference that really makes a difference.

If the base constructs are different, as they are, it is only reasonable that the problems identified would be different and the proposed solutions would be different. As Page notes (correctly), the communication apprehension school suggests the problem is apprehension about communication and the solution is a program to reduce that apprehension, primarily systematic desensitization. While communication apprehension is viewed primarily as a cognitive experience and the treatment is designed to alter the cognitions, the implication is that some behavioral change could be anticipated. Such change has been demonstrated in the research.<sup>7</sup> Note particularly that no claims are made that systematic desensitization (or other method) will alter the behavior of people whose problem is *not* apprehension, or of people who are both apprehensive and have other problems (such as inadequate skills). At best the latter would continue to have problems, but they may not be quite as apprehensive after treatment!

Both the shyness school and Phillips and his associates envision a much larger problem. They see the problem to be people who are not effective communicators. The problem (actually, the problems) then, is communication competence. The solution is a rigidly specific behavior therapy program designed for the individual student, known to the Phillips group as "rhetoritherapy" and in the psychological literature as "skills

training." The implication is that the person's behavior is dysfunctional because the person lacks communication skills; thus, if the person is taught the necessary skills, behavior will become functional. It should be noted that this school does not argue that skills training will overcome apprehension, although I can certainly envision circumstances where it would. However, it is possible under this approach to have a person, who is both skill deficient and apprehensive, develop the necessary skills but not change behaviorally because of continued apprehension.

Let me share an analogy that I have used to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. Consider a basketball player who can make ninety percent of practice free throws but who chokes in a game and only makes fifty percent. The communication apprehension school would treat the apprehension and probably produce a much higher game percentage. The skills trainers would have the person practice shooting free throws, but probably would have no impact on the player's game performance. But take another basketball player. This one shoots fifty percent in practice and fifty percent in the game. The communication apprehension school simply would do nothing for this player; if they provided treatment, it would have no effect. The skills trainers would teach this player how to shoot free throws better and would be very likely to produce a player with a higher game percentage. Different problems require different solutions.

Well, then, who is right? No one or everyone. Take your choice. Both approaches can help people with specific problems. Neither approach can help people with other problems. In our forthcoming book, Richmond and I have attempted to isolate the elements that

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Judith A. Wells and William B. Lashbrook, "A Study of the Effects of Systematic Desensitization of the Communicative Anxiety of Individuals in Small Groups," Paper presented at the SCA convention, New Orleans, 1970; and Frederic D. Glogower, "A Component Analysis of Cognitive Restructuring as Applied to the Reduction of Communication Apprehension," Diss. (psychology) West Virginia Univ. 1977.

lead a person to be noncommunicative.<sup>8</sup> We identify five types of low verbalizers: (1) the skill deficient, (2) the social introvert, (3) the socially alienated, (4) the ethnically/culturally divergent, and (5) the communication apprehensive. Skills training, or rhetoritherapy, should be beneficial for categories 1 and 4. Systematic desensitization should be helpful for categories 4 and 5. But what do we do about categories 2 and 3? Neither approach holds much promise for help.

In closing, I want to stress one very important point: The Phillips approach and the McCroskey approach are not antagonistic. Each has profited from the

<sup>8</sup> James C. McCroskey and Virginia P. Richmond, *The Quite Ones: Shyness and Communication Apprehension* (Dubuque, Iowa: Gorsuch Scarisbrick Publ., 1980).

work of the other. The epistemological approaches are different. The base conceptualizations of the problem are different. The proposed solutions are different. Because one is not like the other does not make one right and the other wrong. Phillips has told me he likes to think of himself as a tinker. I like to think of myself as a scientist. If we look to our kin in the so-called hard sciences, we will find that no significant advances in the human condition have come without the combined contributions of both types of people. Only the naive or the epistemologically ethnocentric would presume things would be otherwise in our corner of academe. Page has neither of these characteristics. His essay should be read with that in mind.

The fountain of content must spring up in the mind; and they who have so little knowledge of human nature as to seek happiness by changing anything but their own dispositions will waste their lives in fruitless efforts, and multiply the griefs which they purpose to remove.

— Johnson.

