
**An Integrated Approach
to Communication Theory
and Research**

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Human Communication
Theory and Research:
Traditions and Models

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The study of human communication has a long and distinguished history. We can safely say that, since humankind first acquired the ability to communicate through verbal and nonverbal symbols and norms, people have “studied” communication. Indeed, one advantage we hold over other animals is the ability to communicate abstractions such as time, place, and space as though each was a concrete object. Thus, since the beginning of our time, we have studied human communication—albeit unscientifically at first, but through more formal systems as we came to better understand both the role of communication in society and its role in daily activity. The importance of the study of human communication is found in its inclusion in educational programs since the first formal schooling systems were developed over 5,000 years ago.

In order to understand how human communication is studied today, it is important to appreciate how we got to where we are now. We will not, however, attempt to provide a complete discussion of the history communication scholarship here. Rather, we will focus on the more important developments and time periods which have impacted on

the contemporary study of human communication. Our goal is to foster an understanding of how what was done in the past influences what we do today, and most likely will influence what we do in the future.

The importance of communication in human society has been recognized for thousands of years, far longer than we can demonstrate through recorded history. The oldest essay ever discovered, written about 3000 B.C., consists of advice on how to speak effectively. This essay was inscribed on a fragment of parchment addressed to Kagemni, the eldest son of the Pharaoh Huni. Similarly, the oldest extant book is a treatise on effective communication. The *Precepts* was composed in Egypt about 2675 B.C. by Ptah-Hotep and written for the guidance of the Pharaoh's son. While these works are significant because they establish that the study of human communication is older than any other area of current academic interest, the actual contribution to current communication theory was minimal.

The study of human communication today can be divided into two major classifications—rhetorical and relational (Shepherd, 1992). The rhetorical communication approach focuses primarily on the study of influence. The function of rhetorical communication is to get others to do what you want or need them to do and/or think the way you want or need them to think—to persuade them. The relational approach, on the other hand, examines communication from a transactional or coorientational perspective. That is, two (or more) people coordinate their communication to reach a shared perspective satisfactory to all. Of paramount concern is the relationship between the two people and the perceived well-being of the "other."

These two divergent orientations represent the dominant orientations of western (individualistic) and eastern (collectivistic) cultures. At their extremes, the western (rhetorical) orientation would sacrifice relationships to accomplish influence and the eastern (relational) orientation would sacrifice the achievement of influence to protect relationships. It is not pragmatic, however, to conceive of these two approaches to the study of human communication as polar opposites. Rather, they represent differences in emphasis. Both are interested in accomplishing objectives and maintaining good relationships through communication. Each, however, emphasize one objective over the other.

We will examine the influence of both of these orientations toward the study of human communication. Since the impact of the rhetorical tradition has been the strongest and longest (McCroskey, 1968, 1993), we consider it first.

THE RHETORICAL TRADITION

The rhetorical tradition begins some 2,500 years after Kagemni's early writing, during the 5th century B.C., at Syracuse, in Sicily. When a democratic regime was established in Syracuse after the overthrow of the tyrant Thrasylbulus, its citizens flooded the courts to recover property that had been confiscated during his reign. The "art of rhetoric" that Corax developed was intended to help ordinary people prove their claims in court. Although Corax and his student, Tisias, are also generally credited with the authorship of a manual on public speaking, the work is no longer extant. Although we are not certain of its contents, scholars suggest that it included two items significant to the

development of rhetorical theory. The first was a theory of how arguments should be developed from probabilities, a theory more thoroughly developed by Aristotle a century later. Corax and Tisias are also credited with first developing the concept of message organization, what we today call an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

In Athens, during the 5th century B.C., there was a large group of itinerant teachers, known as *sophists*, who established small schools and charged students for attending their lectures on rhetoric, literature, science, and philosophy. Many of these teachers became quite wealthy through their efforts. Protagoras of Abdara, sometimes called the "Father of Debate," was one of the first and most important sophists. His teachings contended that there were two sides to every proposition (a *dialectic*) and that speakers should be able to argue either side of the proposition equally well. This view, commonly accepted by today's teachers of argumentation and debate, provides the foundation in the U.S. for communication in today's legal and legislative systems, the very basis of democratic government itself.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Aristotle, in the 3rd century B.C., is generally considered the foremost theorist in the history of the study of human communication from the rhetorical perspective. His *Rhetoric*, written in about 330 B.C., is the most influential work on the topic. It consists of three books, one primarily concerned with the speaker, another concerned with the audience, and the third with the speech itself.

Book I discusses the distinction between rhetorical communication and dialectical communication (the process of inquiry). Aristotle criticized his contemporaries for dwelling upon irrelevant matters in their rhetorical theories rather than concentrating on proofs—particularly enthymemes—or arguments from probabilities. He defined *rhetoric* as "the faculty of discovering in a particular case what are the available means of persuasion." To Aristotle, the means of persuasion were primarily *ethos* (the nature of the source), *pathos* (the emotions of the audience), and *logos* (the nature of the message presented by the source). He focused his concern on three types of speaking: deliberative (speaking in the legislature), forensic (speaking in the law court), and epideictic (speaking in a ceremonial situation). He was concerned with formal public speaking settings and did not address what we would call today "everyday" or "interpersonal" communication.

Within his overall theory of rhetoric, Aristotle included three critical elements. The first was that effective rhetoric is based on argumentation, and that all arguments must be based on *probabilities*. Aristotle held that absolute, verifiable truth is unobtainable in most instances. Therefore, persuasion must be based on what an audience believes to be true. Whereas his teacher, Plato, found this to be a defect in rhetoric and condemned it, Aristotle perceived it simply as a fact, and not a moral issue.

The second essential element in his approach was a conception of the rhetorical communicator's basic task was to *adapt to the audience*. Aristotle believed that you could not persuade a person unless you knew what was likely to persuade that individual. That is, he believed that a knowledge of what we now call "psychology" was essential to effective communication.

These two elements, probability and psychology, led to the third important element in his theory: rhetoric's basic "amorality." Aristotle viewed rhetoric as a tool, one which could be used by anyone—by a good person or a bad one, by a person seeking worthy ends or by one seeking unworthy ends. At the same time, he argued that rhetoric was a self-regulating art. By that he meant the person who is unethical, or who advocates evil, is less likely to be successful than the moral person advocating something good. As justification, he claimed that good and right, by their very nature, are more powerful persuasive tools than their opposites. While acknowledging that evil might win out in the short-run, Aristotle believed that evil would ultimately fail unless people arguing on behalf of good were incompetent rhetorical communicators.

During the Roman period, the 1st century A.D., Aristotle's work was known and writers such as Cicero and Quintilian (often called the "greatest orator" and "greatest teacher," respectively) wrote works within the general perspective of his work, although they were not always in agreement Aristotle's ideas. In general, the Roman period applied the rhetorical theory of the ancient Greeks, and helped to spread its use across the ancient world. Like the Roman period, there was not a great amount of writing on rhetoric in the Middle Ages. During the renaissance, however, more attention was directed toward rhetoric and, although Aristotle's works were known to the scholars of the time, most of their writings centered on matters of style rather than the concerns Aristotle had advanced.

During the 18th century writers such as George Campbell and Richard Whately in England resurrected the Aristotelian perspective toward communication and advanced it with their own theories. In the United States, Professor John Quincy Adams (the same John Quincy Adams to later become President of the United States), who held the chair of rhetoric at Harvard University, presented a series of lectures which set forth for the first time in America a thoroughly classical view of rhetoric. This view was extended in the early 20th century by the early writers, such as James Winans, in what became the field of "Speech."

American Rhetorical Study

The first professional organization of people concerned with the study of human communication, now known as the Eastern Communication Association, was formed in 1909 by a group of teachers of public speaking housed mainly in departments of English at eastern colleges and universities. Five years later, many of these same people joined with people from other parts of the United States to form what is now known as the Speech Communication Association, a national professional association that was then primarily composed of teachers of public speaking.

The people in these associations were primarily concerned (then and now) with developing greater understanding of how human communication works and how people can be taught to be more effective communicators. Because the political and social systems in American society in the first half of this century were very similar to those of Greece in the time of Aristotle, the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition was an excellent fit to the needs of the scholars of that era. The Aristotelian tradition soon became solidly entrenched as the dominant paradigm for the study of human communication.

During the first half of the 20th century the study of human communication expanded rapidly into what has come to be known as the "Speech" tradition. Academic departments of speech were founded in most major colleges and universities across the United States, particularly in the large midwestern institutions. The primary emphasis in these programs was the teaching of public speaking and the study of human communication in the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition. Most programs sponsored debating teams, *à la* Protagoras, and attempts to generate new knowledge about effective rhetoric were centered primarily on rhetorical *criticism* of the addresses of effective, or usually at least famous, public orators.

Although the rhetorical tradition held sway for the most part, departments of Speech expanded their attention to include many other aspects of oral communication. Theater and oral reading, voice and diction, speech pathology and audiology, radio and television broadcasting, and film classes all become common. By the middle of the 20th century many of these new offerings had grown into full-blown programs. Many of these speciality areas began leaving the Speech departments and forming academic units of their own. Theater and oral reading often joined other fine arts programs. Speech pathology and audiology, often accompanied by voice and diction, usually formed their own unit or joined other allied health programs. Broadcasting frequently joined with journalism, and print-oriented programs in public relations and advertising, to form Mass Communication programs. Sometimes film studies joined this group as well.

In many cases, departments which began with their focus on public speaking and the rhetorical tradition diversified extensively and split into several academic units. They then came full circle back to the study of public speaking and the rhetorical tradition. These programs continue to have a strong focus on public presentations, argumentation, and persuasion. Whereas, as we discuss more fully later, most of these programs have made major changes in their curricula (and their names) in the last half of the twentieth century, most continue to include a strong emphasis on work that follows the rhetorical tradition.

Perspectives on the Rhetorical Tradition

In order to understand the nature of the rhetorical approach to the study of human communication, it is useful to gain perspective on the culture in which it originated and where it still thrives. From today's perspective the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome had many positive and many negative characteristics. Despite their interest in philosophy, religion, and the arts and their commitment to a form of democracy, they were harsh cultures. Life expectancies were short, and life was very hard for most people.

These were slave-owning societies in which a slave could be killed or severely punished for even slight offenses against their masters. There was one dominant culture and the rulers of that culture were highly ethnocentric. People of other races and cultures were seen as inferior beings whose lives and well-being were of little value. Women were considered men's property and often treated only slightly better than the slaves. The men of the dominant race and ethnic group totally ruled society. The society was both racist and sexist, and these views were seldom challenged. For all, master and slave, that was just the way it was. From most people's perspectives, these were *not* the good old days.

The legislative and legal systems of these societies were devoted to the maintenance of the ruling class. It was important that the members of that class could resolve disputes and engage in coordinated action to maintain their power and control over the society. Understanding how to communicate effectively within this small ruling group was critical to one who wished to protect one's own interests or attain higher leadership status. Communication, then, was seen as a strategic tool—one to be used by those in power. The perspective was source-oriented—how a speaker could get an audience to do what he wanted them to do. Communication in the courts and in the legislature was primarily concerned with public speaking, and the effective orator was a much respected and powerful person.

Although we sometimes do not like to acknowledge it, this description of ancient Greece and Rome can be applied to the early Western culture, including the United States and many other societies of the 17th through 19th century. Like many other societies, we were a slave-owning society, one in which women, too, were seen as possessions of men. Our legislative and legal systems were modeled on Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Anglo-European tradition. The rhetorical orientation of the Speech Tradition was tailor-made for this society.

The mass communication tradition, like the speech tradition, sprouted from roots in the rhetorical orientation. The predecessors of many of the people working in mass communication today were in departments of journalism and advertising, as well as in speech. Since the beginnings of the study of mass communication focused on public presentation and mass influence, the rhetorical orientation also fit the needs of these early scholars.

THE RELATIONAL TRADITION

The relational tradition is at least as old, and possibly older, than the rhetorical tradition. However, no serious attention was devoted to this orientation in the United States until the latter half of the 20th century. The foundations of the relational orientation stem from ancient Confucian philosophy. Hence, this orientation is most commonly associated with Eastern thought.

While individualism, competition, and straightforward communication are highly valued in most western societies, eastern societies have higher values for congeniality, cooperation, and indirect communication which will protect the "face" of the people interacting. Maintaining valued relationships is generally seen as more important than exerting influence and control over others.

The existence of approaches to communication other than the rhetorical approach was recognized by some scholars in the United States prior the mid-20th century. However, serious attention to the relational orientation did not begin until the 1950s and 1960s. Influential writers such as Robert Oliver (1962) attempted to get the field to pay more attention to the role of culture in communication and how different cultures viewed communication in other parts of the world.

Transitioning to the Relational

A new professional association for communication scholars was founded in 1950, the National Society for the Study of Communication, now known as the International Communication Association. This group was comprised of individuals disillusioned

with studying communication exclusively from the rhetorical perspective. Some were general semanticists, others were primarily concerned with communication in organizations, and others in yet more applied communication settings. In the 1960s and 1970s this association attracted many scholars who were interested in interpersonal communication or the effects of mass media, particularly those who wished to study communication employing quantitative or experimental research methodologies.

The social-scientific movement was very important for the development of the study of human communication as it currently exists. Prior to the onset of this movement, most scholarship in this area employed critical or rationalistic approaches. These approaches were seen as appropriate for the study of essentially monological, one-way communication. Their focus was on the message and context as objects of study. As this one-way, hypodermic-needle approach to understanding communication came under increasing criticism, both the target of research and the methodologies for research came into question.

The social scientific approach to studying human communication had been employed by some since early in the 20th century. However, it was not until the post World War II era that the scientific method became the method of choice for a substantial number of communication scholars. It was natural that a different scholarly method would be applied to the same kinds of questions previously asked (how to persuade effectively) and to new questions. This, indeed, was the case. In the 1960s much of the social scientific research focused on the effects of sources and messages in producing persuasive effects. So much so that, when the early books on interpersonal communication were written, there was very little social scientific research which could be cited in them. By the mid-1970s, however, it was possible to base a book on human communication almost entirely on the social scientific research (McCroskey & Wheelless, 1976).

By the time NSSC became ICA and reached its 25th anniversary, sizeable groups of scholars had formed scholarly interest areas representing organizational communication, interpersonal communication, information systems, mass communication, intercultural communication, instructional communication, health communication, and political communication. Most of these groups also included people from both the rhetorical and the relational traditions.

The quarter-century between 1950 and 1975 represented revolutionary change both in the culture of the United States and in the way people chose to study human communication. The post-World War II and Korean War eras saw dramatic increases in the enrollments of women and members of ethnic and racial minorities in American colleges and universities. Higher education no longer was the domain only of the elite, male, White ruling class.

The civil rights movement of the early 1960s was followed by the women's rights movement of the later 1960s and 1970s. The way people saw themselves relating to others began to change. There were enormous enrollment increases in colleges and universities when the "baby boomers" reaching college age, which was exacerbated by rapid acceptance of the goals of the civil rights and women's rights movements.

These new students had different needs and arrived with different perspectives than those of their predecessors. Because colleges were no longer solely focused on educating "tomorrow's leaders," people began to question the extreme emphasis on teaching public speaking over all other types of communication. Classes in small group communication, and research in this area, greatly increased.

A Truly Relational Perspective

A call for more practical and realistic communication courses was heard. The response by the early 1970s was the initiation of new courses with the term "interpersonal" in their titles. Because little research from a relational perspective had been done by that time, the early courses tended to focus on rhetorical and psychological approaches to interpersonal communication. The early texts tended to focus on either humanistic (Giffin & Patton, 1971) or social scientific (McCroskey, Larson, & Knapp, 1971) orientations. A true relational perspective did not appear until later (Knapp, 1984).

Because *speech* was a term used to identify the traditional rhetorical orientation of the people who studied human communication, and the field was changing, people sought ways to change the identity of their field. While public speaking was no longer the sole, or even most important, focus of the field, people outside the field were generally unaware of this fact. At first, it seemed sufficient to simply add "communication" to the names of departments and associations. Soon it became clear that this change was not enough to make outsiders aware that a major change had been made. Thus, by the mid-1990s the term *speech* had been dropped from the names of almost all scholarly journals in the field, from the names of all the regional and many of the state professional associations, and from the names of most of the departments at major universities. The names generally were changed to "Communication" or "Communication Studies," but some were renamed "Human Communication," "Interpersonal Communication," or "Communication Sciences," although the latter could be confused with some names used by groups concerned with speech pathology and audiology.

HUMAN COMMUNICATION TODAY

The study of human communication today is more diversified than ever before in its history. This diversity is reflected in both what is studied and the way that one goes about studying it.

Both the rhetorical and the relational traditions are alive and well and reflected in the the chapters that follow. Each chapter outlines current thinking in either what could pass for a subfield (persuasion, intercultural communication, organizational communication), or a topic area (credibility, nonverbal communication) which has been and continues to be a focus of attention for numerous scholars, or an approach that some prefer to take in their study of human communication (cultural, feminist).

Because these chapters speak to the way these subfields, areas, or approaches are examined today, there is no need to go into detail here. Within the limitations of a book this size, it is not possible to fully introduce all of the areas within the human communication side of the field. Thus, we simply mention a few that are important but for which no chapter is included here.

The individual differences approach is one which has been employed by some scholars for the past half century and continues to draw major attention today. This approach looks at how people consistently differ from one another in their communication orientations and behaviors. Sometimes this approach is referred to as the personality approach (McCroskey & Daly, 1987).

Scholars studying human communication from this approach investigate how different people have different traits or orientations which result in them communicating differently than other people and responding to others' communication differently as well. Two of the major topics within this area are concerns with people's general willingness to communicate with others and the fear or anxiety that people experience when confronted with communication (Daly & McCroskey, 1984).

With the rapid advances in social biology which indicate that personality has a firm genetic base, this area is one in which we can expect major advances in the next two decades. The possibility exists that through genetic engineering we will even be able to alter individual's patterns of communication behavior which are found dysfunctional in society. Whether we will want to do this, however, is another question.

From the beginning of professional associations in the communication field, a significant number of the members have had a major concern with teaching. Originally that interest was centered on how to teach people to be better communicators. In recent years, this interest in instruction has expanded to a concern with the role of communication in the instructional process generally, not just in teaching communication (McCroskey, 1992). Considerable research in this area (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992) has pointed toward a central position for the study of communication to improve instruction in all disciplines.

Another applied area of communication study is an expansion of the basic interpersonal area. It is the study of communication within the family (Pearson, 1989). Recent research has been able to track the impact of communication between parents and children into the relationships that the younger generation have years later with their significant others. It would appear that understanding the communicative relationships within the family may be key to understanding other relationships people have.

An area which has received considerable attention in recent years is the role of gender in communication (Pearson, 1985). Although research focusing on the impact of biological sex differences on communication has generally found little impact, research on culturally based gender roles has indicated a very large impact. This is an area in which cross-cultural study is particularly useful, for we have learned that gender communication roles are so socialized into people that they are unlikely to recognize they are behaving according to a norm unless they see that there are different norms in other cultures.

A comparatively new approach to the study of communication is the developmental approach (Nussbaum, 1989). This approach examines how communication orientations and behaviors are likely to change during the individual's life span. Of particular interest has been the impact of aging on communication (Nussbaum, Thompson, & Robinson, 1989).

SUMMARY

Although steeped in tradition, the general trend of scholarship in the human communication side of the field of communication is toward more sophisticated theoretical development. It continues to develop more diverse subareas within each larger area of the field, while grounding itself in research methodologies useful for the specific

concerns in the study of communication (rather than borrowed from other fields). Its approach is also increasingly concerned with applied communication research. The study of human communication today is undertaken in a vibrant and forward looking environment, building on firm traditions but diversifying to confront new realities.

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