



Metacommunication

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What is it?

The concept of metacommunication is usually glossed as "communication about communication." Interaction always has two levels: the concrete (content of a message) and the abstract (discussion of the content). People manage these levels simultaneously: speaking (or acting) while sending a second message about how to interpret or frame the first. Metacommunication is thus always a qualifier to behavior, rather than simply being more behavior. Metadiscourse (talk about talk) is verbal and explicit; the broader category of metacommunication also may be nonverbal and implicit (a touch or a smile while talking, a shift in intonation to indicate teasing, etc.).

Who uses the concept?

Gregory Bateson popularized the term, crediting Benjamin Lee Whorf with its invention. Linguists most often study metadiscourse, with other forms of metacommunication examined by those in anthropology, psychology, communication or education. Metacommunication frequently gets mentioned briefly, only rarely serving as the focus of attention.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

The mere fact of holding an intercultural dialogue is a significant metacommunicative message about interest in establishing, maintaining, or re-establishing contact, even in the context of conflict. Talk about cultural differences (whether in language, behavior, or assumptions) and their implications often has a role in intercultural dialogues. "Going meta" permits participants to step

aside from interacting, taking time to analyze what has occurred, is occurring, or will occur in future. In this way misunderstandings become the topic of discussion and may be clarified, repaired, resolved, or even, on occasion, prevented.

What work remains?

Going meta requires the ability to discuss behavior; learning specific vocabulary to facilitate such conversations can be useful. Research is needed investigating types and uses of metacommunication during intercultural dialogues across many contexts. Most work to date has examined metadiscourse; other forms have been slighted. Sharing the concept of metacommunication more widely should be useful. Clearly those who do not know the concept can still take advantage of the possibilities it offers. However, much could be done to teach the value of deliberately shifting levels in order to explicitly discuss the dialogue process.

Resources

- Anderson, P.A. (2009). Metacommunication. In S.W. Littlejohn & K.A. Foss (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of communication theory* (vol. 2, pp. 650-654). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Simons, H. (1994). Going meta: Definition and political applications. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 80(4), 468-481.
- Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2014). Dialogue about dialogue: Taking a (meta)communication perspective on intercultural dialogue. In L. Uladykouskaja (Ed.), *Intercultural dialogue: Modern paradigm and experience of the neighborhood* (pp. 6-13). Minsk, Belarus: Belarusian State University.