Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication

Multiple Perspectives

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Speech Codes Theory

Traces of Culture in Interpersonal Communication

Gerry Philipsen

Speech Codes Theory was developed to apply to all contexts, modes, and settings of communicative conduct. The empirical cases—and surveys and experiments—on which it is built are drawn from studies of interpersonal, organizational, public, and communal communication (Philipsen, 1992, 1997, 2003; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005). However, Speech Codes Theory has a particular relevance to interpersonal communication, which relevance I delineate in this chapter. I define "interpersonal communication" as the production and interpretation of messages between or among two or more people, when those messages are concerned, explicitly or implicitly, with the persons' selves and the persons' relationships with each other.

Purpose and Meta-theoretical Assumptions

The principal assumption of Speech Codes Theory that I apply here to interpersonal communication is that whenever people engage in interpersonal communication there are traces of culture woven into their messages. Traces of culture appear in many forms, verbal and otherwise. The subset of traces of culture that I will be concerned with here are those that can be discerned in words that pertain to communicative conduct, and premises that link two or more words, at least one of which pertains to communicative conduct, in a general statement of belief or value. Such traces include not only the words and premises that are immediately observable in the messages produced in

interpersonal communication but also the meanings and significance they have for the people who use and experience them.

The purpose of Speech Codes Theory, in this context, is to help discern, interpret, and explain the meaning and force of cultural traces, in particular instances of interpersonal communication.

TRACES OF CULTURE IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

To illustrate what I mean by interpersonal communication and by "discern," "interpret," and "explain the meaning and force of cultural traces" in instances of it, I present two vignettes and provide a brief commentary on each of them.

A Norwegian woman complained to an interviewer that her husband will never stand up to his mother when she tries to interfere with the couple's independence. The husband says he believes in "peace at any price" (*fred for enhver pris*), but the wife says she believes that sometimes the price is too high.

What does peace mean in this vignette? Why does the concept of peace at any price, usually used in the context of negotiations between nations over armed conflict, seem to have such importance to the Norwegian man, who uses it to justify his refusal to talk about important topics with his mother? Although his wife believes that the price she is paying for peace is too high, she says she understands the reasoning behind his statement. What, for these interlocutors, is the meaning and force of the man's insistence on not talking bluntly with his mother?

This first vignette is drawn from a program of research conducted and reported by a Norwegian anthropologist, Marianne Gullestad, who studies Norwegian culture. One part of her project is her study of a series of Norwegian words and expressions that she found were used "with frequency and intensity" (1992, p.142) when some Norwegians talk about "interpersonal relations." The two Norwegian words that Gullestad focuses on are *fred* ("peace") and *ro* ("quiet"). She shows that when Norwegians use *fred* in talking about interpersonal relations, they do not express its primary meaning in Norwegian, "absence of war," but rather one of its many secondary meanings, particularly the sense of being "free from disturbances from others." In such contexts they use *ro* to refer to "a state of mind characterized by wholeness and control" (p. 146). To be free from disturbances from others, that is, to "find peace," is, according to the logic that Gullestad formulated, necessary for the achievement of the desired state of personal "wholeness and control." Thus "peace," she said, is often sought at any price, and is used as a justification for avoiding contact with others.

Gullestad (1992) used her study of *fred* and *ro*, along with an examination of several other Norwegian words, to construct a Norwegian "code" (pp. 103, 170) of "social relations" (p. 147). An important part of this code can be summarized by the following principles:

1. "A certain social distance (peace) creates good social relations";

2. For an individual human being, "control of self is especially important" and is "especially connected to peace in its meaning of 'quiet' (*ro*)";

3. As "guidelines for action," one should strive to be "whole, balanced, and safe by not involving oneself too much and by avoiding open personal conflicts. People who do not understand a little hint ought to be avoided" (p. 147).

I think Gullestad regarded this as one part, not the whole, of a Norwegian code of interpersonal relations. Given that her comments extended to communicative conduct (explicitly, in Point 3, with her reference to "not involving oneself too much," "avoiding open personal conflicts," and the importance of understanding "a little hint"), I regard it as part of a Norwegian code of communicative conduct.

With just this much of the code that Gullestad provided in the principles in the preceding paragraph, we can return to the vignette, perhaps with a greater understanding of the meanings of *fred* and *ro* to the Norwegian husband and of the weight of the expression for him of *fred for enhver pris.* Specifically, we find in Gullestad's (1992) work evidence that some Norwegians consider "peace" crucial not just to "good social relations" but also to keeping oneself "whole, balanced, and safe" (p. 147). That is, Gullestad showed how some Norwegians speak about various ways of communicating as being crucial not only to interpersonal life, but also to their very sense of self.

An American university student recalls that when he was nine years old his parents divorced and his father was given weekly visiting rights. On the days that the boy spent with his father, the father insisted that they "communicate" about their "relationship." The father's efforts became burdensome to the boy, who wished his father had just taken him to a baseball game.

What do "communicate" and "relationship" mean to the people who participated in this second vignette? Why does the boy resist "communication," for which one American dictionary gives as the first sense, "the transfer of meaning"? Why would the father think that he and his son would have to communicate, over and over, about their "relationship," which presumably is a biological one of father and son? Is not the relationship of father and son immutable? What, for man and boy, is the force of the man's insistence that he and his son "communicate" about their "relationship"?

During the period of time that Marianne Gullestad was working with Norwegian materials to formulate a Norwegian code of interpersonal relations, my colleagues and I in the United States, as well as other U.S. scholars, were working to formulate an American code of interpersonal relations. As Gullestad did in Norway, we studied the way that Americans used some of the key terms of this code. Tamar Katriel and I began this process of discovering an

American code by tracing the appearance of "communication" in some American speech about interpersonal life. One of our earliest findings was that, as with the Norwegian usage of "peace" in speech about interpersonal relations, much American usage of "communication" in speech about interpersonal relations did not suggest its primary dictionary meaning, but rather something that carries a good deal more moral freight. We glossed the meaning of this situated usage as "close, open, supportive speech," with "close," "open," and "supportive" being terms that we also had to interpret (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981, p. 309). This definition was not in any dictionary, but was warranted by the way people actually used the word "communication."

We also found in our early study (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981) that when Americans used the word "communication" in speech about interpersonal relations, they used it along with several other words we established as part of an American cultural vocabulary of interpersonal relations. Words we presented in 1981 include "relationship," "self," "work," and "feedback." Later studies provide detailed ethnographic interpretations of "commitment" (Quinn, 1982), "relationship" (Rosenthal, 1984), and "honest" (Carbaugh, 1988). See also Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985), Philipsen (1992, 1997), and Philipsen, Horkley, and Huhman (1999), for treatments of these words and their meanings as cultural words in this American code of communicative conduct.

Just as Gullestad (1992) found evidence for a Norwegian premise that "a certain social distance (peace) creates good social relations" (p. 147), we found evidence for the widespread and significant use by Americans of a premise that communication is necessary for a relationship (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981). We used "What we need is communication" in the title of our article to represent an attitude expressed often by many of our respondents in discussing their relationships.

Here is a more recent expression of the premise we reported in 1981. Hollandsworth (1995), a columnist in an American magazine, wrote about interpersonal relations in romantic situations: "Most women aren't satisfied in a relationship until they find a man who's truly communicative—a man who doesn't hesitate to discuss his feelings, desires, and anxieties" (p. 7). With regard to "relationship," the statement's use of "satisfied in" suggests that a "relationship" can be more or less satisfying, that is, "satisfaction" is a variable associated with "relationships." Two other popular writers wrote at this time that "when communication breaks down, your relationship is headed for danger" (Bilicki & Goetz, 1995, p. 60), suggesting that a "relationship" is something that not only can vary, but that it is fragile, susceptible to "breakdown." With regard to the word "communicative," which is a form of the word "communication," Hollandsworth implied with his use of the word "truly" that there is a true (and false) variety of communicative, and that in the true variant the

"man" must "not hesitate" to engage in the speech activity of "discussion" (presumably a give and take of talk) about some specific topical areas—his "feelings," "desires," and "anxieties" (Hollandsworth, p. 7). These authors, writing in popular magazines, suggested a belief that "communication" and "relationship" are linked to each other in important ways; they thus echo Katriel and Philipsen's (1981) report of the widespread and significant American use of the premise that "communication is necessary for a relationship."

With just this much of the code that Katriel and I, and others, have provided in work on an American code, we can return to the American vignette, perhaps with a greater appreciation of the meanings of "communication" and "relationship" to the father, and of the weight that the premise that "what we need is communication" (for "our relationship") carried for him. Although in some codes it would be unthinkable for a "relationship" to "break down" because one of the parties to it seems less than "satisfied" with it, this is the sort of talk that the American father was presumably exposed to, in his face-to-face interactions as well as in the popular media. (See, especially, Philipsen, 1992, chap. 5, for a treatment of the correlation of face-to-face and mediated talk about "communication" and "relationships.")

SPEECH CODES

In interpreting the meanings and explaining the force in these vignettes of words and premises about communicative conduct, I suggested that the people mentioned in them used a code to produce, interpret, and evaluate their own and others' communicative conduct. I used my understanding of those codes to interpret and explain the communicative conduct of the people who used them. What sort of codes are these? I refer to them as "speech codes," which I define as follows: Speech codes are historically situated and socially constructed systems of words, meanings, premises, and rules about communicative conduct. The word "speech" in "speech codes" is a shorthand term, a figure of speech, standing here for all the possible means of communicative conduct that can be encountered in a given time and place. The word "code" in "speech codes" refers to a system of words, meanings, premises, and rules that people use as a resource to talk about, interpret, and shape communicative conduct. These senses of speech and of code, when placed together in the term speech code, establish a definition of a speech code as a historically situated and socially constructed system of words, meanings, premises, and rules that people use to talk about their own and others' communicative conduct.

In 1992, I set forth a prototypical version of a theory of speech codes, with four empirically grounded principles about their nature, their functioning in communicative conduct, and how to discover and describe them. In 1997, I made a formal statement of Speech Codes Theory, with five empirically

grounded propositions. In the latest version of the theory, Philipsen and colleagues (2005) expanded the theory to six propositions, responded to published criticisms of it, and clarified further the nature of the construct of code in it. In the paragraphs that follow I describe the main features of the theory, and the six speech codes propositions.

Main Features of the Theory

The first descriptive generalization is that everywhere there is a distinctive culture, there will be found a distinctive speech code. This was illustrated in the brief juxtaposition of (some elements of) Norwegian and American speech codes, with the suggestion that the Norwegian code gives greater endorsement than does the American to interpersonal communication that is indirect and respectful of personal boundaries, while the American code gives greater endorsement than does the Norwegian to directness of communication and a more changeable self. These are two among many accounts of speech codes that have been analyzed contrastively.

The second descriptive generalization is that every individual will encounter multiple speech codes during a lifetime. Thus, although a Norwegian or an American might use the codes I have described here, these individuals presumably can—and do—draw on other codes that are used in their social environments. Gullestad (1992) and Philipsen (1992) provided book-length treatments of the societies in which they studied the codes they reported; both cases showed evidence of more than one code being used in these societies.

The third descriptive generalization is that in every speech code the words, meanings, premises, and rules pertaining to communicative conduct are systematically linked with words, meanings, premises, and rules pertaining to the nature of persons and the nature of social relationships. This is illustrated here for the Norwegian code in the linkage between indirectness of communication, and the preservation of the well-being of a bounded person. It is illustrated here for the American code in the linkage between openness, and the strength of interpersonal relationships. The import of this generalization is that whenever people engage in interpersonal communication, and use words and premises pertaining to communicative conduct, they bring into the discussion words and premises that carry cultural traces that are always linked, for their meaning and significance, to words and meanings pertaining to notions of self or of interpersonal relations.

These three generalizations are, respectively, Propositions 1, 2, and 3 of Speech Codes Theory.

Speech Codes Theory posits a way to discover and describe traces of culture in communicative conduct. It does this through Proposition 5 of the theory, that the words, rules, and premises of a speech code are inextricably woven into

communicative conduct (Philipsen et al., 2005). The import of Proposition 5 is that it tells one where to look (and listen) for traces of culture—that is, it tells one to look at (and listen to) communicative conduct, and to search therein for the use of a cultural code or codes. It also tells one what to look (and listen) for there, with a specification of a series of ways to discover traces of culture in speaking—for example, to search for the use of words or phrases about communicative conduct (e.g., "a little hint") and premises that include at least one word about communicative conduct (e.g., "communication is necessary for a relationships").

Speech Codes Theory posits a way to interpret and explain observed communicative conduct. In the presentation and examination of the two episodes presented above, I illustrated how speech codes, once discovered and described, can be used to interpret and explain communicative conduct, for example by showing the cultural meaning of the concept of peace and its importance to a Norwegian man in guiding his communicative conduct with his mother and his wife, and by showing the cultural meaning of the concepts of communication and relationship to an American man and the sense of imperative he felt to "communicate" so as to prevent a "breakdown" of the "relationship" with his son.

There are two propositions involved here. Proposition 4 of the theory says that the significance of particular communicative acts is contingent on the speech codes that people use to interpret them—that is, if someone observed a husband refusing to speak up to his mother in defense of the rights of his wife and himself as a couple, the not speaking up would be heard differently if interpreted in the terms of the Norwegian code than it would in the terms of the American code, as these codes were described above. Proposition 6 of Speech Codes Theory says that people use speech codes not only to interpret communicative conduct, but also to evaluate it (as good or bad) and to explain (that is, justify or account for) it.

Speech Codes Theory is an empirical theory. Each of its six propositions was built on a foundation of empirical evidence. Most of that empirical evidence consists of ethnographic studies of speech codes in particular times and places and the comparative analysis of such studies. Gullestad's studies of Norwegian communicative conduct (1992) and the research of Katriel and Philipsen (1981), Philipsen (1975, 1976, 1986, 1992), Carbaugh (1988), Coutu (2000), and others into American communicative conduct are examples of such ethnographic work that provides an empirical account of a speech code in a particular time and place: Norway and the United States, respectively. Philipsen and Carbaugh (1988) and Philipsen (2003) cited a large body of speech codes research conducted in many societies and many languages throughout the world, a fund of research on which Speech Codes Theory is based.

Speech Codes Theory is a dynamic theory. It is subject to change on the basis of new evidence or the rethinking of old evidence. For example, in each of the second and third published versions of the theory (Philipsen, 1997;

Philipsen et al., 2005) one proposition was added based on a reconsideration of existing research or the consideration of new research, in each case leading to a data-based expansion of the number of propositions. (Coutu, 2000, was instrumental in driving the addition of Proposition 2.) Furthermore, each proposition in the theory is stated so that it can be disconfirmed by new evidence or a rethinking of old evidence.

Conceptualization of Communication in the Theory

I define "communication" as the production and interpretation of messages between or among two or more people. There is a commitment in the ethnographic research through which speech codes are discovered and described to pay attention to whatever the people one is studying take communication to be. This requires that the researcher be open to considering a variety of phenomena as falling within the domain of communication that the researcher might otherwise rule out: e.g., considering plants, trees, the wind, or other nonhuman and nonanimal phenomena as potentially part of the communication process. At the same time, if there are no boundaries whatsoever as to what counts as communicative, it is difficult to say what precisely would or would not be included in a speech code, and it is in that spirit that in this exposition of Speech Codes Theory I have presented working definitions of communication and of interpersonal communication.

Uses of the Theory

There are two ways that Speech Codes Theory provides an understanding of interpersonal communication. One is that it provides a perspective on a feature of interpersonal communication in all societies and cultures. The other is that it provides an approach to discerning cultural traces wherever they appear in particular instances of interpersonal communication and to interpreting the meaning and force of those instances for the people who produce and experience them. I will elaborate on each of these points briefly.

First, earlier in this chapter I presented two vignettes of interpersonal communication, one in Norway and one in America. These vignettes were interpreted by reference to what the people in the vignettes said and, by reference in each case, to a large body of research into the cultural background of the people described in them. In each case, an illustration was provided of the idea that when people engage in interpersonal communication there are traces of culture in their messages about their selves and their relations to each other. Furthermore, the analysis of these vignettes showed that one place these traces appeared was in

culturally distinctive words and premises pertaining to communicative conduct. Finally, the analysis of these vignettes showed that, where culturally distinctive words and meanings pertaining to communicative conduct appeared, they appeared not only on their own terms but in premises that link them to culturally distinctive words and meanings for a state of personal well-being or a state of interpersonal relations. The large body of speech codes research, conducted in many languages and many societies, shows that what I illustrated here for Norwegian and American interpersonal communication is true in many other places, including but not limited to Colombia, Finland, Germany, Israel, Mexico, and Spain (see Philipsen, 2003). Speech Codes Theory takes these findings from many cultures and generalizes them to formulate a property of interpersonal communication in all times and places. That property is that when words for and premises pertaining to communicative conduct appear in interpersonal communication there will be traces of culture present in them, and that these traces will bear culturally distinctive meanings and significance.

Speech Codes Theory can help the participants in, or observers of, interpersonal communication to understand the cultural significance of particular instances of the theory. There are three ways the theory does this. First, it helps a person discern that a speech code is being used in someone's interpersonal messages, e.g., by directing attention to words and premises about communicative conduct that are used in those messages. Second, it helps a person interpret the meanings of words about communicative conduct by tracing their use in relation to other words and meanings that co-occur with those words about communicative conduct. Third, it helps to explain why people say what they say in interpersonal messages by showing how, in the premises they use, they link their notions about ways of communicating to their notions about personal well-being and good social relations.

Strengths and Limitations of the Theory

Speech Codes Theory has several strengths as a theory that help to interpret and explain interpersonal communication. First, it specifies several propositions about the nature, discovery, and use of speech codes in interpersonal communication. Second, those propositions are grounded in a substantial fund of evidence gathered through experiment and experience in the study of speech codes. Third, Speech Codes Theory provides several ways to help participants in interpersonal communication understand what they and their fellow interlocutors are saying about themselves and their relationships.

Speech Codes Theory is limited in that it applies to a narrow, albeit an important, dimension of interpersonal communication. That dimension is culture. The theory does not account for personal codes or for universal

behavioral tendencies. Thus, it is a theory that is complementary to other theories that provide sharply focused ways to discern, interpret, and explain interpersonal communication.

Directions for Future Research and Applications

I see three clear areas for future research and application of Speech Codes Theory in interpersonal communication. First, researchers should examine whether participants in interpersonal communication are aware of the use of speech codes by themselves and their interlocutors. As indicated above, we have a great deal of information, across many societies, that suggests that everywhere there is interpersonal communication the participants produce and interpret messages in part through the use of culturally distinctive words and premises pertaining to communicative conduct. When participants do the producing and interpreting, how aware are they that they are using a particular cultural code? For example, when someone talks with a friend, lover, spouse, or relative about their relation to each other, and uses such words as "peace," "quiet," "communication," or "relationship," is that person aware that he or she is speaking not naturally but culturally, that is, in the terms of a distinctive cultural code?

When someone repeats a version of the statement that "communication is necessary for a relationship," has that person considered whether things other than "communication" might be just as or more important? For example, is "communication" more important, or even as important, to a romantic or marital "relationship" as, say, carefulness in the making and keeping of romantic or marital vows, self-sacrifice in consideration of the other's well-being in the escalation of a romantic relationship, or fidelity to a partner? Textbooks in interpersonal communication tend to carry several pages, sometimes whole chapters, on the topics of self-disclosure and the negotiation of selves, but in many cases do not even mention such topics as the speech acts of promising or of making a vow. Additionally, can "relationships" end or break down? If so, what is the notion of relationship that is therefore implied? Cannot relationships be constituted on the basis of blood or the making of vows, and can blood be negotiated? Does awareness that one is using a particular code, say the American code discussed in this chapter, extend to the idea that in using this particular code one is emphasizing one set of moral and ethical commitments over others?

Second, researchers should examine the key terms and premises of the American code of "communication" that is referred to in this chapter. Several different key words in this code have been discerned and interpreted, including "communication," "close," "open," "supportive," "work," "self," "relationship,"

"commitment," and "honesty." What we do not know is how these and other words fit together into an American cultural system of symbols and meanings pertaining to communicative conduct. This American code is important to Americans and to anyone who wants to understand those Americans who use it, and yet there is little in the way of a systematic tying together of the diverse studies, each of which reveals something important about contemporary American life, but all of which, when put together into a comprehensive synthesis, would provide an important understanding of both America and the important speech code found in America.

Third, researchers should examine what is the force, if any, that speech codes have on the thought and conduct of people who use those codes. Proposition 5 of Speech Codes Theory implies that just because someone uses a speech code does not mean that the person's thought is restricted or shaped by that use, or that the person's communicative conduct is determined by the terms of the code. At the same time, there is a great deal of evidence that such codes indeed do have some shaping influence on the thought and conduct of those who use them. The question of cultural and linguistic determinism is a classic and enduring one. The more elaborated development elsewhere of Proposition 5 suggests several important lines of research that need to be pursued before we have a satisfactory understanding of the force of speech codes.

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