



A Review of Introduction to Communication Theory

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A Review of *Introduction to Communication Theory*

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I Introduction

Japan's international communication ability trails many other countries whose official language is also not English but have lower gross domestic products, public taxation and government spending. This flaw is not just one of linguistic ability, but not being taught how to interact intelligibly with others. In recent decades communication in combination with English has become formalized as a major university course and department title in its own right the world over (see **Appendix: Sample Syllabus**). In Japan, however, the equivalent college departments are cut off incommunicado in the past. Communication is even regarded as much as the study of the "enemy" as the English language is (2020 Olympic Chief Yoshihiro Mori's comments, *The Japan Times* February 2014). So when a text required for future teachers and imposed on all studying English and "international communication" professes to contain the fundamentals of interaction in English, could it raise some hope for a more communicative Japan in the near future? Or, is a title that boasts unqualified expertise like **Introduction to Communication Theory** (2015) too good to be true? Questions about author Miyahara's translator's experience and credentials also raise red flags. Dubious research publication here is commonplace (Goodyear 2016). Students and subordinates are prone to exploitation by superiors using them as unpaid data inputters and ghost translators when their names should be on the covers not those of their exploiters.

Various factors further compound the doubts surrounding the English translation of Miyahara's 1992 original, romanized as *Nyumonkomyunikeeshonron* sounding like New-mon-communication-ron. For example, the absence of any kind of index will make it difficult for readers to locate important topics. No legitimate study can omit an index, certainly not one claiming to contain essentials of communication. The misleadingly unqualified title implies a major international perspective, whereas the book's actual domain (a narrow timeframe in just 2 out of 200 countries, with a strong leaning towards Japan) is limited. Equally disturbing is the study's length or rather lack of it. Miyahara's original is only 96 pages in total. This is far too short to unlock any of the mysteries of the untold areas that communication theory implies.

To give some further irritating examples of the translation's erring and unhelpful eccentricity:

- (1) The writer's affiliation is given incorrectly twice (100 and 227) both times as "Seian" not "Seinan".
- (2) The contents (pages iii-vii, all references are to the English translation) are repeated, running to a

tedious 20 pages in length. The second time (103-118) “main points” are unnecessarily given in Japanese. The words “communication”, “communicative” and their Japanese equivalents are themselves repeated over 300 times in the contents and titles alone. Is this an attempt to convince readers of the book’s authority to pontificate? Sadly, it only communicates redundancy and one-directional repetitiveness. Claiming this makes the main points bilingual is odd considering the “translator’s” moot Japanese. Such maneuvering begs questions like: “If it’s supposed to be a translation, why not keep it all in English?”

Miyahara raises contentious issues. Japanese seem to be cast as uniquely capable of decorum. The proof given is of a Japanese refusing a second helping of ice cream out of ignorance abroad once (40). This stereotyping supposedly establishes that Japan possesses a global genetic monopoly on uniqueness. The inability to see one’s national communication style as no more or less unique than any other country’s is a major barrier to mutual understanding and global self-expression (Brasor *Japan Times* 2017). Miyahara implies successful communication means imposing one’s opinion on others irrelevant of the validity (44). He suggests Americans’ brusqueness is the highest standard of communication yet their gun and drug culture are reflected in the prevalence of bad language. Most of the 2 billion non-American English users communicate well without such scourges, suggesting the former are a poor role model.

Miyahara has a propensity to stereotype people and stigmatize various conditions. Thus he calls autistic people’s “mental problem” regrettable as they can only converse with those close to them and thus fail to express themselves in any significant way (49). Moreover, although a whole section is spent on promoting “free will” (52) it is paradoxical that the book appears to press for dialogic domination (44). At the same time as suggesting Japanese people’s speed of thought is superior, “Noise” (65, misapplying Shannon’s original terminology of 1948) implies that thinking when listening prevents “communication”. Yet to process and interact fully with what others have to say, we need to bring all our knowledge and analytical repertoire to bear simultaneously. Suppressing the attempt to do so is worse than not listening, unless the purpose is indoctrination, all too common in Japanese education. With just a few lines afforded to “Educational Communication” (25) it would have been better perhaps to find more important and realistic points to stress than “spitting among students” which Miyahara singles out as one of Japan’s most “serious social problems”. In four decades of teaching thousands of students of all ages and abilities in Japan, I have yet to hear of let alone witness any spitting contests among my or anyone else’s pupils.

By trying to pigeonhole a few generalized forms of communication, Miyahara only achieves a warped, unbalanced and oversimplified outline, sweeping important areas under the *tatami*, as it were, to suit his parochial vision of vague stereotypes and idealized forms of Americans and Japanese. The former are used to emphasize the supreme specialness of the latter. Using the Pacific War to underpin his study (71) compromises any timely, relevant vision as 1942-1945 is not the

epicenter of global communication.

Where the book fails catastrophically is in the disconnect it creates between its implied and actual range of cultural context. Miyahara reduces everything to Japan v America (or rather the few time, class and ethnicity locked slices of each he knows) in an attempt to emphasize the former's specialness over everywhere else. His use of "special" often seems to border if not encroach on "superior". The title's shortcomings create a can of worms with words he can't unsay. On top of this is Miyahara's assertion that intense academic study before one even starts to try to communicate is somehow the only approach to mastering culture (27 etc.) This puts his cart before reality's horse. The best way for many to improve their understanding of anything (especially culture) is to learn from experiencing communication head on.

2 Wider Windows on Communication

To widen this insular perspective, let's consider some 21st and pre-21st century concepts of communication for comparison. Sociolinguistic perspectives like Miyahara's deviate from those of mediated discourse researchers (Scollon 2001, Gee 2004.) Their research stresses communication, language use and related issues as part of our social practice and in a dialectic relationship with language. They suggest language use equals social practice situated at the intersection of the discourses and social relationships that people bring to what they call sites of engagement or moments of real-time social action. Communication is a social practice, operating at the junctions of and subject to social norms and values, relationships between the interlocutors, the ideas that our discourses entail and all the routine-based practices we bring to these moments of interaction. This broad mapping of human activity accounts for more than just a process at any particular time. It takes into account all of the elements we bring with us which are actively foregrounded or backgrounded (sometimes on purpose) during these interactions.

On a more immediate and visceral level, to teach or learn language we need a working definition. There are more meanings of communication than there have been communicators. The expanding digital universe is accelerating communication's evolution exponentially. Most researchers simplify or skip the subject altogether. They dive straight in at the deep end of "communication strategies" without even knowing what they're swimming in. We ignore this stage at our peril, as without it, education's purpose and effect is undermined completely. To be licensed as language teachers in Japan students often seem condemned to staid and archaic conceptual mausoleums, lacking anything but the surface validity of hierarchic imposition. A case in point is Miyahara's own erroneously titled study. Its scope is expanded far beyond the original's mandate. It was better expressed in Japanese implying its more limited context. It was confined to Japanese with cherry-picked American comparisons, and then focused on the former. This cannot justify the

universal communication theory implicit in its English title's inferred expansion. English is the global language of the digital age. Japanese expresses a single nation's self-containment.

The study also ignored many contemporary experts in the field (e.g., Craig 1989). The viewpoint Miyahara offers dictates 126 meanings of communication in the world's resource books from 1,000 BC, or less than half the times "communication" and "communicative" occur in the translation's contents and titles. Miyahara claims to end all of the vagueness surrounding communication by defining it as "the process in which people influence each other using a message composed of symbols" (and above 7).

No definition could be more indefinite. Miyahara should have defined his parameters better as just 126 possibilities for all communication's possible meanings are too few. There are as many as 7,000 living languages. If only one user of each language has thought of a meaning of communication once (unless they all plagiarized each other) Miyahara misjudges the true total by a disastrously Titanic percentage. Even in Japan there must be many more meanings of communication than 126. If we add to this mix all the countless macro and micro cultures, then his implication that we should study "culture" academically at length before engaging in communication seems all the more inept and ridiculous.

While it may be impossible to attempt a single, simple sound bite definition of the former, to proceed further we must first identify some of communication's most common forms. The Internet, now the self-proclaimed global authority on communication, touts text "chat/conversation" as the main form. Yet no qualitative evidence exists, only the sheer number of texts sent. Up to half of all texting occurs in America, and is often restricted to a line or less of consonants with the odd vowel, number or symbol. Quantity alone can't grab texting's top spot in global communication rankings. Most of the world's total population communicates more in many other ways, and especially in forms other than phatic writing.

Texting's claim to fame, like e-mail before it, is its cheapness. However, in the connected world, being cheap or free comes at a high price. It risks the diminution or deconstruction of real communication by imposing often false mass marketing on users. Commercial monopolization of many services can compromise spontaneous interaction. Displays of brute ego turn bullies' opinions into "truths" by negating the possibility of honest alternatives. They deny others the possibility of real communication. Psychologists suggest texting is less communicative than media moguls admit because texts isolate the message from the person by devocalizing communication (Schneiderman *Psychology Today* 2013).

If, contrary to its sponsors' claims, texting isn't the gold standard for real communication, maybe it's some other form of writing? After all, the "experts" on communication past and present peddle their ideological wares in print, actual or virtual, and language teaching (especially in Japan) is text-bound to the core. If writing is a distant last in the global communication stakes then

speaking and listening must be top? Possibly there's a silver medal there, but they can never be the real winners. In fact, the only real gold is in the "paralinguistics" event as it were, because we are born with paralinguistic abilities, like facial expressions, and develop them as we grow. About 60% of communication is via body language, 30% through vocal tone, pitch, and emphasis, and less than 10% through the content of a message.

Paralinguistic ability is therefore core, conveying meaning long before lexis comes into play. After all, even babies can communicate successfully without having to text or write. Anyone can in a face-to-face setting. It is the echelon of communication. We have always lived in a world of facial, physical and tonal expression as the true communicators of our feelings even if semantics dissemble. When all else fails, people gesture and can often learn many new words in the interaction that this creates.

Our audible delivery quirks and physical movements say more about our motives than any lie detectors or truth serums can educe. Cyber "communication" on the other hand naturally devolves to the level of spam, spyware or main-frame malware as virtual reality is too easily edited into fraud and falsity. Miyahara's crack at catching communication omits its paralinguistic core. The discrepancy would leave non-Japanese readers of the translation literally dumbstruck. As for inexperienced students of low English ability, they will be hermetically sealed off by it.

Just consider the opening lines (1) as they set the whole tone:

"The reason (to study it) is to learn again, in a unified study, about the mechanism, properties and function of our everyday communication and train so the acquired knowledge can be put into practice." The language of his crucial opening statement sets the mood for everything that follows. Yet it's vague. Paraphrased, it is tautological. The reason to communicate is, to communicate? Questions raised include: Who is he talking about? Why must study be unified? What is this mysterious acquisition of wisdom? Who practices with whom? Where? When? How? How much? Is everyday communication all the same? Why is everything already learned wrong? Few readers will waste time guessing answers to such riddles.

3 Elements and Definitions of Communication

Before sinking any deeper into Miyahara's murky mire of ambiguity, let's consider some core elements of communication. The most important values of communicating must include at least:

- *the unequivocal intention to convey what the conveyer believes to be true.*
- *the interactive ability to realize that our understanding may be lacking or wrong.*
- *the readiness to update our own world view by engaging in many kinds of communication.*

Without these prerequisites, communication cannot enter into the conversation, so to speak. Accordingly, in one stroke this wipes out the communicative validity of most social media forms

connecting us ultimately to commerce, connivance and crime, the core antonyms of communication.

If we consult some representative contemporary definitions, they seem increasingly at variance with Miyahara's 126 as well as with most present-day Japanese educational contortions of the concept:

- “the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, etc., to someone else” (*Merriam-Webster English Learners Dictionary*)
- “. . . a two-way exchange of opinions, news and information by writing, speech or gestures including body language and facial reactions.” (yourdictionary.com/communication#XujV2WQb8PJ7m8Iv.99)
- “. . . a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information, news, ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning.” (businessdictionary.com/definition/communication.html)

Of the above (all accessed in 2017) the final one comes the closest to the target, although the first and second are still better than anything Miyahara or Japanese educational authorities can muster. Definition one (*Merriam-Webster English Learners Dictionary*) takes the bronze for third place as prioritizing the assertion of one's own beliefs means it only goes half-way to communicative interaction. Next, *your dictionary*, the second attempt above, gets silver for second place as it stresses actual exchange and includes the most important aspects; the paralinguistic and the spoken in that order.

It is the final attempt (*business dictionary*) that gets gold as it declares co-operative and creative contact as the ultimate goal of communication. Naturally, not all communicative attempts attain this lofty objective, but if that is not at least their aim, the possibility of any real communication is compromised. The only failing is that it suggests all communication is two-way when it is just as often multi-directional. If it is one way however, it is just a monologue, except perhaps for exceptionally objective individuals.

4 Origins of Communication Theory

Communication theory is foremost a field of information theory and mathematics concerning the technical processes involved. It has since been speciously superimposed on human communication. Forcing a definition beyond its original context like this amounts to pseudo-intellectual opportunism. Historically, the fundamental concern of communication theory was reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message generated from another point (Shannon 1948). This is poles apart from what daily human communication implies, so modelling

studies based on the mathematical paradigm only creates a paradoxical mismatch. The origins of communication theory are linked to the development of information theory from a century ago. The emergent stage of applied communication theory coincided with Shannon's focus on the problem of how to encode the information that a sender wanted to transmit using aspects of probability theory. He then founded the field of information theory. Shannon's fundamental contribution to natural language processing and computational linguistics involved linking cultural practice and probabilistic cognition. This led to research on new models of communication from perspectives like psychology and sociology. Scholars from disciplines different from mathematics and engineering recalibrated this to develop a model of communication helped by the mathematical theory of communication. Shannon's work proved valuable for communication engineers in dealing with such issues as the capacity of various communication channels in bits per second in fields like computer science. It also led to useful work on redundancy in language. Making information measurable gave rise to the mathematical study of information theory. He specified the basic elements of communication as: *Source>Sender>Channel>Receiver>Destination>Message>Feedback*. Attempts to legitimize the study of human communication theory by superimposing such labels onto shifting linguistic phenomena smack of pseudo-science and actually fails to elucidate any real communication.

5 Conclusion

In the Japanese context, instead of seeking transparency in communication, theory means interring oneself ever deeper in one's own self-image to see less of the reality beyond such a narrow vision. **Introduction to Communication Theory** focuses on the mythical specialness and uniqueness of the Japanese character on a micro-mono-cultural basis of anecdotal impression. Every culture is unique. Insisting one is more so than the rest is indefensible, ignores previous studies and evades communication. The process is limited to a narrow, inward-looking exercise. Japanese education is a key case in point. Fads and fictions abound, rendering communication achievement ever more distant. Experts obsess over self-serving theories and conjecture, redirecting ideas from their original contexts often with little effect. This is the antithesis of communication, which is interaction in search of honesty. Miyahara's vignette to American communication seems backgrounded to Japan's supreme uniqueness. It perverts the original premise of communication to replace it with subjective anecdotes of no consequence.

For Miyahara, communication and learning English seem joined at the hip with learning about one other country's culture, America's. But this is extreme like the examples offered and defies the fact that there may be many other ways to learn to communicate. It is enough to know that one's culture is not necessarily the same or different from that of other countries. Miyahara focuses too

much on the specifics of one culture, obsessively leaning towards citing America as the absolute standard. This is as unbalanced as ignoring cultural differences completely. Instead, to be able to explain one's own culture is a passport to global understanding inviting explanations about every culture one may encounter. One dumbfounding example of the failure to grasp this is Miyahara's own "comical case" of cultural contrast "a western woman, who not knowing how a Japanese person stands and behaves, dresses in a kimono and walks with legs far apart" (95). Such examples do not contribute to communication, theory or understanding at all.

Based on outdated experiences of a narrow group of Americans in a limited area of America from several decades ago is concern enough. Adding to this the fact that the book never appeared in English until 2015 and that it was not translated by the original author suggests that Miyahara's original impressions were not objective. Why not do it himself, unless his view of communication was so narrow and insular? The author's original grasp of and interest in English at the time of forming what are now outdated hearsay conclusions must also be called into question. The viewpoint is self-serving relying on token comparisons. Like most parochial Japanese works, it defies serious internationalization. The translation's attempts to update the past and give it greater currency and further reaching significance in English also seem dubious. It is likely it never appeared in English before as it was meant only for captive audiences and domestic consumption. Translation turns the original into historical text and still limited only to Japan. Wider communication may never have been intended to be part of the equation.

These contradictions cannot stand and the book's titular claim of establishing a broad theory of communication can never escape the mono-cultural prison of its own making. Any theory of communication cannot be the limited property of anyone whose linguistic or translation competence is in doubt or whose cultural grasp is limited to the narrow and outdated set of personal reminiscences confined to a short visit to America decades ago.

The author and his translator muddy the meaning of communication ("the social interaction where at least two interacting agents share a common set of signs and a common set of semiotic rules") by prescribing it as "the process in which people influence each other using a message composed of symbols" (7). That such a simplistic definition could convey anything comprehensible about real communication to anybody is absurd. If you asked someone what this sentence meant without including the word communication in it, most might hazard a guess at some kind of writing. That is where the problem starts as it suggests communication is mainly written, whereas most is not.

Of the hundreds of standard Communication Theory texts listed in even short monographs in the field in the 1980s and 1990s, only a single one of the few items in Miyahara's isolated bibliography can be found there. He lists as many Japanese as English studies, none of which are to be found in standard Communication Theory works from his or any previous or subsequent time,

mainly from the 1970s, with a mere handful from the 1980s, and just one from 1990. This further antiquates the contents and findings. The references' focus is even more suspect than its paucity, including such vagaries as "Japanese consciousness" "culture shock" "human nature" and "Japanese and Americans". It lacks broad international relevance and reveals more about the sad limitations of Japanese research than how to actually communicate in even a single human language, let alone a plural number.

Miyahara's study and its translation underscore the dichotomies of vacuum-packing communication in Japan and in its under-achieving foreign-language education system. "Communication" risks being reduced to its antonym, deliberate deception. "To arrive at the truth, each gathers info, analyses it, presents a position & gets others to agree" (203). The translator makes this point in the verbose second half of **Introduction to Communication Theory** not by Miyahara. Yet many unanswered questions remain about the translation and who contributed to it. We may never arrive at any "truth" other than the de facto name on the cover accordingly not given in this study.

If the basis of communication is honesty, why does an in-house monograph "Learning in Communication Studies" (*Ningenbunkakenkyuunenpo* 2015) imply the translator co-authored Miyahara's work? Any book on communication that may affect education and a nation's profile needs scrutinizing closely especially as the 2020 Olympics near. This is at least Japan's second chance at major international exchanges nationwide since 1964 and coming to grips with the real import of communication, honest interaction in English, which has so far proven elusive. The failure may be even greater if we include the Nagano Winter Olympics and the 2012 FIFA World Cup which Japan has half-heartedly co-hosted with negative results for its improved ability to communicate better internationally. Not only is Japan's status on the line as a democracy, but also as a Japan that can say something meaningful to the world in English.

Miyahara's work maintains a limited value but its translation's motivations are problematic. Whose responsibility that is requires further analysis. For sure all the add-ons (the lesson plans, quiz questions and bilingual superfluities) do not honestly belong here, especially if only grafted on the original to piggyback one's way to co-authorship. 100 plus pages of bilingual summaries by a translator of questionable Japanese skills for a text of less than 100 pages itself is disingenuous. After a weak start (1, see **2 Wider Windows on Communication**) the translation ends with even less focus or clarity:

Even if it seems that a person who has diplomats as parents, was born, spent the infancy and lives in a foreign country is qualified as a cosmopolitan, evidently, it may be that these things sometimes facilitate the establishment of international vision but it is never the reason that one is cosmopolitan. Also, as described so far, communication is not something which just happens to improve by itself, but it is done by positive effort. It is also possible to

say completely the same thing about the cosmopolitan. To live as a cosmopolitan it is necessary to acquire the necessary abilities which make oneself a cosmopolitan (96).

The vague, gobbledygook expression (1 sentence exceeds 50 words) is exacerbated by the staccato use of commas. These few lines exhaust the word “cosmopolitan” annoyingly reminiscent of the repetition of “communications” and “communicatives” of the contents pages. The preceding 95 pages do not justify these words at all as the vision presented, as well as its presentation and translation, are neither cosmopolitan nor communicative. At best the book has some limited local relevance as both writer and translator are based in Kyushu. However, its genesis demonstrates the insular nature of research in Japan. International communication (like effective translations) are endangered species in this environment.

(The reviewer wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Fritz de Groot of the Linguistics Department, University of Reading, UK, for the informative contributions he made to the opening paragraph of section 2 Wider Windows on Communication.)

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Appendix: Sample English and Communication Syllabus

University of Durham, U.K. (2017)

Year 1 *Exploring Language*

Group Communication

Exploring Communication

English Language: Present, Past and Future

Language and Communication in Context

Year 2 *Intercultural Communication 1*

Language Acquisition

Investigating Language and Communication

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

Business Communication

Technology Mediated Communication
Year 3 *Language and Society*
Intercultural Training
English Language and Communication in the Workplace
Language and Gender
International Business Communication

(デイビッド ジョン ウッド：英語学科 教授)

