# USING COMMUNICATION TO MAKE OR BREAK RELATIONSHIPS

***Giulia SUCIU***
*University of Oradea*

*Abstract: Communication is what defines us as human beings; we cannot go through a day without communicating. Communication is of paramount importance when it comes to our relationships, to our workplace etc. And yet, there are times when, despite everyone's efforts, communication breaks down. The present paper focuses on the relation between message and metamessage as well as the human needs that motivate communication – the need to form relationships and the need not to be imposed on – and how a wrong interpretation of any of the above-mentioned factors, may lead to miscommunication.*

*Keywords: communication, conversational styles, language, metamessage, involvement versus independence.*

Relationships are made or broken through talk. Talking shapes our relationships, maintaining or breaking them. As Deborah Tannen states in her book "*That's not What I Meant"*[1], communication is more or less cross-cultural. We learn to use language as we grow up; and growing up in different geographical areas, having different religious beliefs, different class backgrounds, or simply just being male or female (as John Gray[2] suggested, women and men already belong to different cultures since men are from Mars and women from Venus) - all these lead to different ways of talking. Deborah Tannen calls these different ways of talking "conversational styles". As relationships are formed and maintained through language, even small differences in conversational styles may lead to misunderstandings and then to the breaking up of these relationships.

Miscommunication may arise not only from what we say – *the message* -, but also from how we say it – *the metamessage*. Words convey information, while the metamessage conveys how we actually feel about that information, by means of loudness, intonation, emphasis etc. "How we say what we say communicates social meaning".[3] We usually don't think about what we are saying, how we are saying it unless it is a special situation, such as a job interview, a conference etc. We don't do it consciously, we never think in advance of the tone of voice to use, the intonation etc. However, all these transmit to the addressee our feelings towards what is being said. By simply changing the pitch on a word we can change the metamessage.

Conversational signals such as: loudness, fast pace, pausing, pitch and intonation etc. are used in everyday situations to convey the metamessage. But because these devices are not explicit, they may give way to misunderstandings. Some persons may use loudness and fast

[1] Tannen, Deborah, *That Is not What I Meant* , Ballantine books ,New York, 1986, p.16.
[2] Gray, John. *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, New York : Harper Collins, 1992
[3] Tannen, Deborah, *That Is not What I Meant* , Ballantine books ,New York, 1986, p.16.



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space to show involvement, to show that they are listening. But different expectations as to how much of a reaction is appropriate may again lead to miscommunications; if there is too little reaction, the speaker might conclude that you are not interested, if there is too much reaction the speaker might be put off. Asking questions is another way of showing that you care, but at the same time you may appear as nosy, imposing on the speaker. When you are complaining you expect people to respond to your complaint, to let you know that you are in the same boat. This is the metamessage of complaining. All these conversational signals and devices are usually invisible. They are "the silent gears that drive conversations. We don't pay attention to the gears unless something seems to have gone wrong."[4] And then we begin to make adjustments in pitch, loudness etc. to avoid causing misunderstandings.

Besides the concept of metamessages, we have to mention the human needs that motivate communication: the need to get in touch, form relationships with the others, and the need to be left alone, not to be imposed on. Which brings us to the concept of politeness – how do we serve these two antagonistic needs? Deborah Tannen sums up these needs under the following heading: *involvement* versus *independence*: on the one hand the need to get close to our fellow beings, to have a sense of community, and on the other hand the need to keep the distance. Independence entails focusing on the message, that is on the information. Information-focused talk is characterised by getting straight to the point, without wasting time with small talk etc., and ignoring the metamessage, which eventually leads to difficulties in maintaining a relationship. Involvement on the other hand presupposes a metamessage-focused talk, paying attention to the other person's feelings, attitudes etc.

But there is a vicious circle or a "double bind" as Deborah Tannen calls it. Our desire to get involved might be interpreted as a threat to someone's independence, while everything we say or do to keep the distance represents a threat to involvement. Therefore "whatever we do to serve one need, violates the other".[5] One solution would be to give up communicating, which is not a viable one since communication is what characterises us as human beings. What is left for us to do is to maintain this fragile balance between involvement and independence by continually adjusting our conversational style. The way these adjustments are made is actually what we call politeness.

Linguistic politeness means recognizing the autonomy of others and avoiding intrusion, as well as emphasizing connectedness and appreciation. The linguistic means by which politeness is appropriately conveyed in English are vary varied: lexical choice among different words, intonation, selecting the appropriate grammatical construction etc.

One very simple way in which people are polite is by producing the appropriate amount of talk for the situation they are in, which brings us to Grice's[6] cooperative principle which is closely related to the politeness principle. However, these rules apply in the case in which factual information is being transmitted. We use these maxims to decide the contextual appropriateness of our utterances when politeness is not an issue.

[4]Tannen, Deborah, *That Is not What I Meant* , Ballantine books , New York, 1986, p.50
[5]Idem, p.20
[6] Grice,H.P.1967. *Logic and Conversation.* Reprinted in Peter Cole and Jery Morgan, eds., *Syntax and Semantics, Vol.3: Speech Acts*. New York : Academic Press, 1975.



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But if we try to apply these maxims to real conversation, they seem relative and the following question might arise: How much is necessary? Which truth? What is relevant? What is clear? Grice himself admitted that a great deal of everyday conversation seems to violate these maxims, without however being considered as anomalous conversation. Even if certain boundaries were to be set, we still have to take into account the feelings of the person we are addressing: if we are trying to keep the distance, we have to temper it not to send the message of rejection, or if we are trying to get closer, we have to adjust what we say so that it would not be taken as a threat to the addressee's independence.

Therefore Robin Lakoff devised another set of four rules which summarizes how we adjust our behaviour to take into account the effect our words might have on the other person. "Ideally the Rules of Politeness, when fully and correctly formulated, should be able to predict why, in a particular culture a particular act in a particular circumstance is polite, or not polite; and should also be valid for both linguistic polite behaviour (saying 'please', using 'formal' pronouns in languages that have such forms) and non-linguistic politeness (opening doors for others, bringing wine to your dinner host)."[7] The rules are the following:

- Formality: keep aloof
- Deference: give options
- Camaraderie: show sympathy
- Clarity : factual information

Then first rule is considered the rule of formal politeness, creating a distance between speaker and addressee and underlining the fact that there is no emotive content to his utterance. Its aim is to inspire separateness and privacy. Hostility is not expressed by confrontation, but by means of sarcasm, irony etc. This distance between speaker and listener may be achieved in various ways:

  - the use of formal *you* ( *dumneavoastră* in Romanian)
  - formal passive which denotes no involvement on the part of the speaker

  e.g. It has been shown that…..
- academic-authorial *we*
- hypercorrect forms, avoidance of colloquialisms
- the use of titles and last names
- the use of the generic pronoun *one*, instead of *you* or *I*
- the use of technical words

All these devices distance the speaker from the addressee(s), placing him in a one-up position, that of superiority over the addressee.

The second rule may be used alone or in combination with the first or third rule. The second rule makes it look as if the decision belonged to the addressee its aim being to avoid imposition. Very often this is but a convention, since the speaker is very well aware that he /she holds the power. Hostility cannot be openly expressed but can be conveyed through questions or silence. While the first rule proposed by Robin Lakoff suggested that the speaker is in a one-up position, the second rule suggests, even if merely conventionally, the superiority of the addressee over the speaker. Question intonation, hedges and question tags

[7] Lakoff, Robin, *Language and Woman's Place*. New York : Harper and Row. 1989 p.64.



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are some of the devices through which the second rule may be exemplified. Euphemism are also specific for rule number two, - usually encountered in gossip - since it lets it up to the addressee to pretend that he didn't actually hear.

Rule number one and rule number three are mutually exclusive: you cannot keep the distance and be friendly at the same time." You cannot be extending the hand of friendship and stepping back aloofy at once."[8] The aim of rule number three is to make the addressee feel liked. Participants can express their equality and their feelings towards one other, be it friendly or hostile. Like rule number two, this rule might be real or conventional. For example a boss telling his employee to call him by his first name – the equality is conventional, everybody knows clearly who the boss is. Some of the devices used to make the addressee feel you are interested in him are:

- colloquial language,
- the use of short, simple words, as opposed to technical words in Rule number one
- the use of nick-names or first names
- non-linguistic devices, such as hugging, back slapping etc

While Rule number one and rule number two presuppose an inequality between speaker and hearer, rule number three focuses on egalitarianism. Of course the application of these rules depends on society and cultural stereotypes. The same act may be viewed as a violation of one of the rules in one society, while other societies may regard it as a polite act.

Rule number four is used for the pure expression of factual information without paying attention to the issue of closeness or distance.

"So we can say that Grice's Conversational Principles are usable only in case there is no possibility of conflict with the Rules of politeness, or in situations in which polite conversation is not felt to be required, where pure information is to be required, information about the outside world, rather than about the personal and interpersonal feelings of the speaker and the addressee."[9]

Politeness means taking into account the effect your words, or the way you say those words, ma have on the listener. But again, politeness is a two-edged sword: if something bad happened to a friend of mine, I might not mention the thing in order not to remind him/her of the whole ordeal, but he/she might be offended that I don't really care about what he/she has been through. There are different ways of showing involvement, therefore the danger of misinterpretation is imminent.

In everything we do, in everything we say, or how we say it, we have to balance our conflicting needs for involvement and independence. We do this by hinting and picking up hints; that is by meaning things without actually saying the words. The benefits of indirectness are two-folded. First you benefit in rapport, you don't say it in a person's face what he/she should or should not do. Deborah Tannen gives the example of the Greek father who never gave his daughter direct answers, but from the way he formulated the answers, the

[8] Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1989. p.67.
[9] Idem, p.73.



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girl knew whether he agreed or not. Thus he put the weight of choosing on her shoulders and he appears to be the good father, who never forbade her to do anything, regardless of her decision. On the other hand, you benefit in self-defense; nobody can accuse you of saying something, if you haven't said it. Nothing has gone on record, so whatever happens, you can save face. If what you want does not meet with a positive response you can always take it back.

But there are also dangers to indirectness; if someone is being indirect while his listener expects him to be direct, misunderstandings can occur. Our way of talking may seem perfectly natural to us, but probably the addressee doesn't get our hints. Some people consider being indirect as a mark of politeness; their aim is to maintain camaraderie, to avoid imposing on the other person, give that person freedom of choice etc. But your good intentions may be interpreted in a totally different way: there are people who take indirectness as not clear communication, therefore refusing to act on it, or take it as a sign of insecurity, indecisiveness. The reverse of this situation is also true. Being too direct is considered by some people as downright rude, as an insult. Many of the arguments I had with my mother arouse from indirectness. My mother expects me to infer what she wants from what she says. I expect her to be direct, and tell me what she wants, because I don't think that in a family directness can be perceived as an insult.

Saying one thing and actually meaning another is also a source of irony, sarcasm or joking. Joking can emphasise rapport, by cheering up the atmosphere through shared laughter and it can also help you save face by simply saying "I was just joking!"

There are many ways in telling the truth. It is almost impossible to always tell the truth and nothing but the truth. First of all, everything is interpretable, so even if we say the truth, people might understand something else. And we have also to take into account the fact that the truth might hurt people. In conclusion, which side of the truth we tell depends on the target audience.

Communication is mostly indirect, hinted at in metamessages, picked up in tones of voice, intonation, body language etc. precisely because of its two-folded benefits: in rapport (that is *involvement*) and in self-defense (that is *independence*).

If the desire to get involved, to show solidarity may be interpreted as a sign of power, so can the need for independence. By using titles and last names, instead of first names, by standing off, keeping the distance you choose to appear superior, which leads to a failure in solidarity. Similarly, by giving options, keeping the distance when necessary (devices used to express politeness), you choose to appear inferior in status.

But appearances can be misleading. What appears to be a display of power, is actually a failure to express solidarity. Deborah Tannen gives the example of a famous speaker that appears at conferences only long enough to present his paper and then disappears. Obviously his colleagues interpret this as a presumption of superiority. But far from considering himself superior, the speaker considers that he is not good enough; he doesn't know how to approach the others, and therefore keeps the distance, appearing superior to those around him.

Our conversations are characterised by a constant fight to balance power and solidarity: we fight to maintain our independence but at the same time we make efforts to show love and care, to fulfil our need for involvement. "Conversational signals and devices



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send metamessages about involvement and independence that work indirectly to frame our talk and express and negotiate our relationships to each other, including juggling the relative power and solidarity entailed in those relationships."[10]

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[10] Tannen, Deborah. *That Is not What I Meant*, New York: Ballantine, 1986. p.109.



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