CHAPTER 1
An Overview of Everyday Communication

Communication and relationships are intertwined processes. Not merely speaking into the air, communication is speaking into relationships, whether you are speaking to your best friend about something personal, signaling your membership with fellow citizens by honoring the flag, or presenting a talk to an audience of complete strangers. Furthermore, “communication” is not simply messages sent from one person to another; communication does something: It causes a result, creates an atmosphere, manages an identity, and, for example, reveals your age, gender, race, or culture. That is, any type of communication you ever participate in both has a relationship assumed underneath it and does or achieves something for you as a result; namely, communication creates a world of meaning. These two themes—that communication is based in the relationships of everyday life and that it creates more than it appears to—are the themes of our approach. Therefore, this book takes a relational perspective to communication, and the constant guide in understanding everyday communication will be the relationships that you have with other people.

Not only, like all other basic communication books, will *The Basics of Communication* teach you what communication is, but it will also continually interconnect with your everyday experience of relating to and with other people. Defining communication turns out to be difficult, and it will take the whole chapter to conclude what it means. Within this chapter, we invite you to start thinking more carefully about everyday communication and how it works. We will teach you how to break down its components and assumptions and see why communication is not as simple as it looks. In the rest of the book, we will show you how to connect and use these components and assumptions, thus allowing you to apply them to all sorts of communicative activity,
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such as giving a speech, acing an interview, making a toast at a wedding, persuading a friend to do you a favor, or making someone feel comfortable talking with you. You will also learn how to deal successfully with a relational conflict that could lose you a friend if you do not handle it effectively and with sensitivity.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What is communication, and how does it work in your everyday life?
- How does communication create worlds of meaning?
- How do the assumptions in a culture affect communication?
- What are the properties of communication?
- What does it mean to say that communication is both representational and presentational, and why is the difference important?
- What is a “frame,” and how is communication framed?
- What is a working definition of communication for this book?

What Is Communication Anyway?

At this point, you may be asking the “big deal” questions: What is so problematic about everyday communication? Why bother to explain it? Don’t we all know what it is about and how it works? Communication is just about sending messages, right?

True: Most of the time, we communicate without thinking, and it is not usually awkward. But if communicating is so easy, why do we have misunderstandings, conflicts, arguments, disputes, and disagreements? Why do we get embarrassed because we have said something thoughtless? Why are we misunderstood, and why do we misunderstand others? If communication is simple, how do we know when people are lying if all that matters is listening to their words as a straightforward representation of a situation? Why would anyone be agitated or anxious about giving a public talk if talk is just saying what you think? Why is communication via e-mail so easy to misinterpret? People would never disagree about what happened in a conversation if the students who asked the above “big deal” questions were right. Why, then, are allegations of sexual harassment sometimes denied vigorously, and how can there ever be doubt whether one person intentionally touched another person inappropriately? Why are coworkers so often a problem for many people, and what is it about their communication that makes them “difficult”?

Many students assume that communication means the sending of messages from one person to another through e-mails, phone calls, gestures, instant or text messages, or spoken word. They often assume that communication informs other people about what we’re thinking, where we are, or how to do stuff or else, like text
messages between cell phones, that it transmits information from Person A to Person B. That basic view has some truth to it, but communication involves a lot more than simply sending messages as if they are tennis balls hit to an opponent. Students also need to know more about “messages”: Like tennis balls, they can bounce oddly, spin off, or miss their target. We’ll explain how contexts modify messages: Meeting a person in class, for example, is different from meeting the same person at a party.

Even if communication were just about messages, the notion of “messages” would need a closer look. The meaning of messages—not simple in the way that instant messages contain certain unchangeable words—is modified by the person who says them. For example, consider the phrase “I love you” said to you by your mother, your brother, your friend, your priest, your instructor, the president of the United States, or your physician. See how messages get more complex even when the words (“I love you”) are the same? Also think of “I love you” said by the same person (e.g., your mother) on your birthday, after a fight with her, as you leave home for school, on her deathbed, at Thanksgiving, or at the end of a phone call. Would it mean the same thing? Finally, think of “I love you” said by your romantic partner in a short, sharp way; in a long, lingering way; with a frown; with a smile; with a hand on your arm as you get up to leave; or with a hesitant and questioning tone of voice. The same words send a different message depending on the context and the style of delivery.

**Thinking More Carefully About Everyday Communication**

Let’s start by examining our first two claims: Not just emotional connections, relationships create worlds of meaning for us through communication, and communication produces the same result for us through relationships. As one example, group decision making is not accomplished just by the logic of arguments, agenda setting, and solution evaluations but also by group members’ relationships with one another outside the group setting. Groups that meet to make decisions almost never come from nowhere, communicate, make a decision, and then go home. The members know one another, talk informally outside the group setting, and have personal likes and dislikes for one another that will affect their discussions about certain matters. Many decisions that appear to be made during an open discussion are actually sometimes tied up before the communication begins. Think about what generally happens in Congress. The politicians often know how the vote will go before the debate actually happens. Words have been dropped in ears, promises made, factions formed, and
relationships displayed well in advance of any discussion. This striking but everyday
example might make you think of others from your life: How does influence work in
your family? Is everyone equal? What about interactions with friends and enemies?
Do you believe them equally, as if they are independent and pure sources of truth-
ful messages? How about TV shows and news channels? Does it make a difference
whether you like the newscaster or not, or do you trust them all equally?

Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967) put it a
little differently, suggesting that whenever you communicate with anyone, you also relate to
them at the same time. All communication contains both a content (message) level and a rela-
tional level, which means that, as well as conveying information, every message indicates how
the speaker and listener are socially and person-
ally related. In the United States, for example,
you say, “Excuse me, sir...” when addressing a

In Japanese, there are more than 200 ways for one person to address another
according to protocols of respect and status differences recognized by the
participants. Pretend you are going on a business trip to Japan; what could you do
to prepare yourself and ensure that you do not insult your customers/clients?

Photo 1.1  We often realize that people put a presentational “spin” on their talk to influence the
way we understand what they say. One of these customers appears a little more skeptical than the
other and seems to be evaluating what the salesman has said. How can you tell? (See page 23.)
stranger rather than “Hey, jerk…” But there are other, less obvious relational cues in speech about who is the boss and who is the employee, who is a professor and who is the student, who is the parent and who is the child, or who is the server and who is the customer. For example, “Come into my office! Now!” indicates a status difference just through the style of the communication. Because the relationships between people most often are not openly expressed but subtly indicated or taken for granted in most communication in any particular culture, the content and relational components of messages are not always easy to separate. You must pay careful attention to learn how it is done. We’ll start with a familiar experience and work through it as a means to get a discussion going: a restaurant server speaking to customers.

What Do You Do Through Communication?

“Hi! My name is Roberta, and I’ll be your server today. Our special is witchety grub stewed in yak fat with broccoli sautéed in mushroom sauce at $24.95. If you have any questions, let me know. May I get you anything to drink while you read the menu?”

Look at the above server introduction and its contents:

A greeting: “Hi!”

An introduction to the person: “My name is Roberta.”

A direct statement of the person’s relationship to you: “I’ll be your server today.”

A list of particular foods

If you do not recognize “witchety grub,” it may be because you are not an Australian for whom this is a food delicacy, but the rest probably makes sense even if you do not know that a yak is a species of livestock cattle in China. These details are known in their original culture, but you belong to a different culture in which they are strange. Other cultures make different assumptions than your culture makes and take different knowledge for granted. Communication scholars talk about culture “getting done” or “being performed” in relationships through assumptions taken for granted between two communicators. Each time you talk to someone, from your culture or another, you are taking knowledge for granted, doing what your culture expects, and treating people in ways the culture acknowledges. You are doing, performing, and enacting your culture through communication; you are speaking not just into the air but into the relationships recognized by your culture.

In our example, the server’s introduction makes sense because the speaker splits the world up in much the same way that you do, and you also know how to “do/speak restaurant” and what a “menu” is, for example. Most people understand how communication points out particular objects in this way (“menu,” “server,” “broccoli,”
“our special”). But notice also how the communication makes the interaction work in a particular way, setting up one person (server) in a particular kind of relationship with the other person (customer) while setting that relationship up as friendly and casual (“Hi,” not “A thousand welcomes, princely masters”). We have built-in expectations about the relationship between a server and a customer. You already know and take for granted that these relational differences exist in restaurants and that restaurants have “servers” who generally carry out instructions of “customers.” Therefore, you expect that you as the customer will be greeted, treated with some respect by the server, told what the special is, and asked to make choices. You know that you will eventually pay for your food and that the server is there not only to bring you food, water, the check, and your change but also to help if you have difficulties understanding the menu. Roberta will answer any questions about the way the food is prepared or help if you need to find the restrooms. Both you and your server take this for granted; it is a cultural as well as relational element of your communication. All of this is included in the idea of “doing culture” or “doing relationships” in communication.

We asked you earlier to think about whether communication is just about sending and receiving messages. Now ask yourself how many messages the server is sending in this relatively brief encounter. There seem to be just four: her name, her job, the nature of the special on the menu, and the greeting. On deeper inspection, you might find such others as status, culture, and politeness—all relational in their own ways. Also note that the comments are appropriate only in some places and at some times—in restaurants but not at your graduation ceremony as you shake hands with the president to get your diploma. Communication scholars would say that the introduction also “does various work,” for example, to structure time. Notice how the words make sense only as the beginning of an interaction. If Roberta said them when you were leaving her restaurant, you’d think she was nuts. The comments also use codes; that is, they use one idea to stand in for others. Roberta says “menu” rather than “a list of all the food that we prepare, cook, and serve in this restaurant for you to choose for your meal” because she assumed you would know the code word menu and its meaning in a restaurant as opposed to on a computer screen.

**MAKE YOUR CASE**

Do you think someone from another culture might be confused about Americans’ love of buffalo wings? What are some other food names that might confuse a visitor to this country? Have you ever sampled (or seen on TV) an unfamiliar food from another culture? Describe the experience. Was there anything about the name or type of food that shocked or surprised you or challenged your assumptions about “food?”
This simple example from everyday life experience in our culture underlines the point that when you communicate with other people, many assumptions are made—sometimes about meaning or power or relationships or gender or race or the culture in which the communication occurs. Whether or not you know it, all of those assumptions—and much else besides—happen whenever you communicate, steering and shaping the interaction. Indeed, one fundamental aspect of speaking is built on the fact that you and your audience—whether it is a wedding group, a political rally, your boss, or your friend—know what you mean when you use certain words. Remember that in Japan, Mexico, China, or Zimbabwe, people take for granted not only different assumptions about words but also different rules about respect, greeting rituals, rank, and relationships between people.

So, if upon beginning this chapter a definition of communication seemed obvious to you, that was partly because you did not yet recognize all the assumptions that you take for granted in your cultural experience. At this point, you do not question or even notice communication in your everyday life, yet every time you talk to someone else, you are doing/speaking your culture, doing/speaking your relationship with that person, and doing/speaking your identity. Communication does more than send a simple message; it builds a world of meaning on one person’s relationship with another.

Photo 1.2  What are some ways, both verbal and nonverbal, that communication takes place? (See page 23.)
Stating this idea more technically, communication not only describes the world but also sets it up in a particular way, makes interactions happen in a particular form, and directs how we deal with other people. Part of this creative element of communication shows up as a way of establishing the relationship between you and the server, but the same formative and relational messages are conveyed in all interactions. The way you speak to someone tells him or her and everyone else whether the two of you are close; whether you are strangers; whether you are equals; which one of you is respectful, anxious, or shy; who commands a relationship; or who is rude.

Three Ways to Think About Communication: Action, Interaction, and Transaction

By now, you know that communication takes a lot for granted and is affected by context, relationships, and culture. You also know that it creates worlds of meaning. So now let’s look at these properties and effects of communication a little more deeply and systematically. In everyday life, people use the term communication in three ways, often without realizing the importance of the differences between the uses. Each usage assumes something different about how communication works and whether or not it has even really happened.

Communication as Action

If you see communication as action, you see it as a sender sending messages whether or not they are received. Communication as action occurs when someone leaves a message on your voice-mail, posts a message on your desk, or puts a message in a bottle in the ocean—that is, when someone transmits information through words or gestures and their accompanying meaning. So if Carlos sends an e-mail to Melissa, communication has occurred. But what if Melissa doesn’t read her e-mail? Has communication truly occurred? According to the definition of communication as action, the answer is yes, but really, all you know is that there has been an attempt to communicate.

Communication as Interaction

Let’s look at a different way of thinking about communication—namely, communication as interaction, which counts something as communication only if
is an exchange of information between two (or more) individuals. Using the previous example, communication exists between Carlos and Melissa if Carlos sends Melissa an e-mail and Melissa replies. This exchange represents a much more typical perception of communication. In fact, people tend to use the term communication for communication as both action and interaction, but the two are actually very different.

**Communication as Transaction**

An even more sophisticated way to see communication is communication as transaction, or the construction of shared meanings or understandings between two (or more) individuals. For example, communication exists between Carlos and Melissa if, through their e-mail messages, they both arrive at the shared realization that they understand/love/know/need each other or their communication results in a deal. In other words, the interaction results in more than the exchange of literal messages. They get more out of it, and extra meanings (e.g., about the relationships between the people) are communicated above and beyond the content of the messages exchanged. A pair of messages, such as “Please get some milk” and “OK,” also produces a result: Someone gets some milk because both participants realize that was the transaction’s intended result. The communication, then, is interesting not because simple messages were exchanged but because something magical and extra happened. Two people speak and trust is built (transacted); two people touch one another and love is realized (transacted); two people argue and power is exerted (transacted); someone calls a grown man “Boy” and racial bigotry is transacted; a man holds the door open for a woman and either sexist stereotyping or politeness is transacted, depending on your taken-for-granted assumptions. In all cases, the communication message (the actual words, gestures, or actions) transacts or constitutes something above and beyond the words, gestures, or actions.

Although it is possible to see communication as action, interaction, or transaction, in this book, our relational perspective makes transaction the most interesting, and it draws our attention to the fact that communication creates more than reports, especially in everyday communication between people who know one another. This constitutive approach to communication pays close attention to the fact that communication can create or bring into existence (constitute) something that has not been there before. From the transactional/constitutive point of view, in all communication we go beyond what is happening in the talk itself to create something new.

**Properties and Effects of Communication**

The ability to constitute, transact, or create a world of meaning gives communication its power, allowing you to “go beyond” the obvious to the hidden meaning. For example, you see a symbol (e.g., “the finger”) and “go beyond” to what it stands for (you are
being insulted). To fully understand what all of these ideas mean, we must explore the properties and effects of communication. After examining symbols, the fundamental elements of communication, we can then discuss such issues as (a) meaning, (b) representation and presentation, (c) what is taken for granted in the use of symbols, and (d) intentionality. These items will be crucial in realizing all the ways you “go beyond” in, as well as in leading us to our definition of, communication.

Communication Involves the Use of Symbols

All communication is characterized by the use of symbols, a topic that has a very long tradition in the history of our discipline (Saussure, 1910/1993; Griffin, 2006). A symbol is an object or idea whose meaning is more complicated than it looks: For example, “the finger” is an abusive symbol of rejection, the Stars and Stripes is a symbol of the United States, $ is a symbol for dollar, and a red light is a symbol for “Stop.” A more complicated example is a police officer’s uniform, which is a symbol not only for “power,” “official,” and “law and order/law enforcement” but also for more taken-for-granted knowledge, such as “I have been trained” and “I will serve and protect.” In all of these cases, the symbols (and a person using them) are understood because the audience can “go beyond” the visible object or symbol and understand the intention or meaning beneath it.

Whether verbal or nonverbal, a symbol’s meaning is not always simple. In fact, we can go beyond the symbols described above. For instance, if you look at a red light on top of a yellow light and a green light, you can go beyond to recognize that you are looking at an organized system of lights that is different from a red light on its own. You can even go beyond that to realize that the three lights organized together are arranged in a particular combination that makes this “a traffic light.” You can go beyond that to realize that the traffic light controls traffic. This examination of a traffic light might strike you as so obvious that you don’t see why it matters, but it is very important that you have learned that the three lights in particular order at particular places convey very specialized meanings to particular beings (to drivers but not to birds, for example). In fact, the ability to recognize such orders and symbolic arrangements is fundamental to communication. Traffic lights do not in any sense at all communicate messages to birds about stopping and going, even if they might provide convenient perches. Birds just don’t get it; they don’t understand the symbols that humans understand in the traffic signal. As drivers, you see the red light and halt your car because you have already made several “going beyond” computations: red light → traffic signal → traffic signals have legal force → traffic signals control traffic → red traffic signal means stop your car because it is dangerous to proceed → other drivers now have priority → you could get a ticket if you don’t stop. If the drivers in front of you stop at a red traffic light, you don’t honk at them; you know why they stopped. They understood the red light in the same way you do.

The terms symbols and signs are sometimes used interchangeably, but we will draw a broad technical differentiation and then stick to the term symbol as used
below. A sign (also called an indexical sign) in this technical sense has a causal connection to something. For example, a weather vane is a sign of the direction of the wind; wet streets are a sign of rain; smoke is a sign of fire. However we argue about it, we cannot make smoke not happen when there is a fire or make streets not get wet when it rains. There is a direct causal connection between them. Signs are always consequences and indicators of something specific, which human beings cannot change by our arbitrary actions or labels.

Symbols, on the other hand, are arbitrary representations of ideas, objects, people, relationships, cultures, genders, and races—to name only a few. For example, the shape of a heart is a symbol of love; a star on the shoulder is a symbol of rank and power; a touch on the arm could be a symbol of sympathy or love; a large car could be a symbol of wealth, power, and status. The exact meaning of the representation or the best way to represent what we mean can be something that we can change or that a society (or partners in a relationship) can argue about, or it can be something where different cultures make different arbitrary choices (for example, the U.S. Army and the British Army indicate the rank of General by different symbols on the shoulder). A symbol can be a movement, a sound, a picture, a logo, a gesture, a mark, or anything else that represents something other than itself—but its meaning is always made up. You already know lots of symbols that communicate—for example, the hand sign for “call me” or the picture that indicates a restroom.

Symbols can be split into those that are iconic and those that are not. Both are representations of ideas as indicated above, but icons look like what they represent—for example, the stick figures used to indicate men’s and women’s restrooms or the airplane sign used to indicate the way to the airport. Other symbols do not have the pictorial connection to what they represent. The dollar sign does not look like a dollar; the heart shape symbolizes love but is not a picture of love so much as a picture of the place where you sometimes say, metaphorically, you feel the love.

Because symbols are arbitrary, made-up conventions for representing something, they can be different in different cultures, and strangers need extra help. When Steve’s mother first came to the United States, for example, she could find directions not to “toilets” but only to “restrooms,” and she did not want a rest. Eventually, she had to ask someone. The euphemism restroom is not immediately obvious to cultural outsiders as a reference to toilet facilities. In other cultures—for example in England—they may be referred to as conveniences or by a sign saying WC (meaning water closet). Even some indicators for restrooms within U.S. culture are quite confusing, as they very clearly require a shared understanding of cultural reference points (for example, your authors have seen indicators for Does and Bucks, Pointers and Setters, Lads and Lasses, and Knights in Need and Damsels in Distress).

Where cultures meet—for example in airports—this shared understanding cannot be
presumed. Where travelers are from several different countries and may speak different languages, there tends to be greater use of icons and pictures that people from different nations can recognize as meaning “men” or women.” In some places, the words men and women convey to us that we will find things useful for men and women, but we need not only the ability to read English but also the knowledge to assume something about the facilities that will be provided. We need to know, for example, not to enter these places merely because we want to be in the company of men or women. We also have to know that the icons or other symbols mean “for women only” or “for men only.” As one of the assumptions made in our society, that message normally goes unstated.

Because symbols may have different meanings in different cultures, one of the difficulties in creating universal road warnings is finding a picture that everyone in all cultures will recognize as having the same meaning. Most of the diagrams that we call road “signs” are actually symbols, in the sense that they are arbitrary but agreed upon: a picture of an airplane that means “to the airport.” To find them useful, it is really important to know what specific symbols mean in particular cultures or in particular contexts in your own culture. In this sense, then, symbols, whether iconic or not, do culture, because you have to understand the culture, at least in part, in order to know what the symbol means there.

You may now realize that words are symbols too. Language is a symbolic form of communication similar to the other symbols just discussed: Language uses words to stand for objects or ideas. One of the assumptions we make about language is that it is intended to communicate, to make the listeners go beyond the sounds themselves. You probably first thought of symbols in terms of just pictures that...
represent something else, but obviously the sound “chair” does not look, feel, or even sound like what you sit on. The word *chair* has been arbitrarily chosen to represent the objects on which we sit, and other languages represent the same item in different symbolic ways (*sella*, *chaise*, *stoel*, and *zetel*, for example).

**Communication Requires Meaning**

Communication requires that symbols convey meaning or, as we have termed it, that they permit a communicator to “go beyond” one item to another. What a symbol represents is said to be its meaning; particular meanings, however, are not tied to only one symbol but can be conveyed in multiple ways using different symbols. For example, happiness can be conveyed by the words “I’m happy,” by a thumbs-up sign, or by waving a flag and jumping up and down when your team scores. A friend of yours may indicate “I’m happy” just by talking more frequently than otherwise. Over the course of the relationship, you have learned that her frequency of talk is a meaningful indicator of her emotional state.

Furthermore, because they are completely arbitrary, symbols have the potential for multiple meanings subject to change. For example, Griffin (2006) points out that a yellow ribbon tied around a tree once meant forgiveness and willingness to accept a person back; then, it started to mean “Welcome home”; then, it came to mean “Please come home”; and then, “Come home safely.” Now it is often used to mean “Support our troops who are away from home.”

If such a change can occur, any meaning attached to a symbol has been arbitrarily constituted and socially constructed, and it varies according to culture, context, and the relationship between the interactants. Let’s look at what is meant by “socially constructed.” Symbols take on meaning in a social context or society as they are used over time. Communication scholars Hopper, Knapp, and Scott (1981) pointed out this context in personal relationships, such as when romantic couples develop code words and phrases (“personal idioms”), secret ways to refer to other people or to discreetly tell the partner that it is time to leave a party early. You could quite easily say openly to your partner, “My left foot itches” as a code phrase for “I’m very bored; let’s get out of here,” but the second phrase would be very impolite to say in front of others. The meaning of symbols within a society or relationship do not develop overnight but instead result from continued use and negotiation of meaning within that society or relationship, as in the earlier example of the yellow ribbon.

A single symbol can also have multiple meanings when used in different contexts. For example, the physical context, or the actual location in which a symbol is used, will impact its meaning. If you said, “There is a fire,” while in a campground, it would mean something entirely different than if you said those exact same words while in a crowded movie theater. The

**Did you know that the thumbs-up symbol does not mean OK in all cultures? In some cultures, it is a crude sexual insult.**
situational context will also impact the meaning of a symbol. Asking someone out on a date would mean one thing when uttered at a bar on singles’ night and something else entirely if the question were asked of someone recently widowed—and at the spouse’s funeral.

The same symbols will also differ in meaning according to the interactants’ relationship. Look again at the earlier example of saying, “I love you.” It means something vastly different when spoken to a person you have been dating for more than a year than it does when spoken to a blind date you met just three hours ago. Saying it to the first person would probably elicit a smile, while saying it to the second might lead to embarrassment, in the United States at least—some cultures do not either recognize or encourage “dating” in the first place (Chornet-Roses, 2006)!

**Communication Is Both Presentational and Representational**

Your use of symbols indicates not only what is true (the facts) but also what you would like people to think (your personal view of the facts). This is true whether you look at nonverbal behavior or verbal behavior, but let’s take language first. Communication can be representational and presentational; that is, although it normally describes facts or conveys information (representation), it also presents your particular version of, or “take” on, the facts or events (presentation). In short, you must stop seeing communication as simply a neutral way of reporting the objective world and start looking for ways in which people communicate strategically or put a rhetorical “spin” on their reports of events, people, and objects.

So used to thinking that language just describes facts (representation), people sometimes find this distinction hard to grasp. But you may recognize that when a conservative news channel reports political events, it picks up on different aspects of the news than a liberal news channel does, and it also explains, analyzes, and evaluates them differently. Each channel presents reality in the way it wants you to understand it. When the two sides in a court case tell their stories, they are not representing reality but presenting two different ways to think about an event. When you give a persuasive speech, you do not just give the facts (representation); instead, you carefully select those facts that will make your presentation more persuasive. Students do not always recognize at first that the same presentational processes go on in informal, everyday speech. For example, if you say, “My boss is an SOB,” it is not an objective comment (representation) but a strategic communication of a personal view of the boss (presentation). If you say, “This class stinks,” it is an opinion (presentation), not a fact (representation), and other people may disagree with you. If reviewers give a movie four out of five stars, that too is an opinion, a presentation rather than a representation, as some may find the movie disappointing.

The same kind of distinction between representation and presentation can be made about nonverbal behavior. Have you ever seen people at football games wearing huge sponge hands with the index finger pointing up to indicate “We’re number one”? The team may not actually be number one, but the people wearing
the sponge fingers—doing a presentational form of nonverbal behavior—would like it to be. If, on the other hand, someone asks you where the student union is located and you point directly toward it, your nonverbal behavior is representational and indicates the position of something real.

In all of your everyday talk, then—a vital point for you to understand for the rest of this book—your communication with other people presents them with a way of looking at the world that is based on how you prefer them to see it. Your talk is not a neutral descriptive representation; it is always presentational and intended to persuade (Hauser, 1986). Keep in mind what we said earlier: Think of representation as “facts” and presentation as “spin” (or strategic communication), and listen for how your words often put a lot more of your personal perspectives into what you say than they seem to do at first glance.

**Communication Takes Much for Granted**

If communication uses arbitrary symbols whose meaning can vary between occasions, differ between cultures and persons, and alter according to circumstances, isn’t it a miracle that we ever understand one another at all? How on earth do we do it? Wood and Duck (2006) point out that talk is used in social frames. Frames are basic forms of knowledge that provide a definition of a scenario, either because both people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions built into the interaction and the previous relational context of talk give them a clue. Think of the frame on a picture and how it pulls our attention into some elements (picture) and excludes all the rest (the wall, the gallery, the furniture). In similar fashion, a conversational frame draws a boundary around the conversation and pulls our attention toward certain things and away from others. When we talk in the “frame” of a communication class, we can discuss communication in a special, focused, and expert way, but in the “frame” of TV news or business management, good communication might just refer to the way a president gets a political point across or to the style of management employed by a boss to her employees.

In interviews, one person talks to run the show, and the other one talks to play a secondary part by answering rather than asking questions. Understanding the interview frame helps you understand your role in the conversation and what is expected of you. Likewise, understanding the restaurant frame helps you understand why one person is talking about specials and insisting that you make decisions based on a piece of laminated cardboard that lists costs of food. In any social frame, you also understand rules about turn taking: When you talk, you hope that the other person will listen, and you both know you should not talk at the same time, in White U.S. culture at least—Latino and African American cultures often encourage and expect simultaneous speech as a sign of involvement and attention (“Amen!”). If your instructor says something and then pauses, it may indicate to you that you are expected to reply (for example, “Oh yes, Professor, I certainly agree. You are 100% right; very good point”). In this case, the nature of the social and relational frame says more than the pure content of the text. This set of assumptions
helps you act appropriately by answering questions, filling pauses, taking turns, or regulating the interaction so it moves forward in ways suited to that situation. Also notice that although instructors may call on students to participate in discussion, students rarely call on instructors in the same way: The frame of expectations is simply different.

When communicating with others, you make other framing assumptions about how they might interpret and understand the terms used. The assumptions made when communicating in a relationship often mean that a great deal can be left unsaid. Think about your own life where you and your friends take a lot for granted and don’t say everything explicitly. Having both taught at the University of Iowa, when your authors talk with one another, we can include words or terms that presume knowledge of the university (such as Hawkeyes, Pentacrest, and LR1-VAN). These terms require a background of knowledge built into the interpretation of the words themselves, some of which depends specifically on knowing about the University of Iowa (for example, that University of Iowa students are nicknamed “Hawkeyes,” that the Pentacrest is the administration center, and that LR1-VAN is a particular lecture hall). Each term would not need to be explained in our conversation because both authors know that the other one understands what those symbols/words mean.

Another assumption that gets made when communicating is that the other person will be able to recognize the presentational nature of communication. He or she will recognize that the symbols being used not only convey but also make reference beyond their literal meaning. An instructor’s comment, “This is on the test,” for instance, usually creates an energetic frenzy in students. “This is on the test” is a 5-word sentence, but students will read it as 28 words: “This is on the test, and if you want a grade better than a C, you must take particular note of what I am going to say next.” In other words, much of what we say means more than what we actually say. Of course, you also have to know what “C” means, both as a symbol of your performance and also as something interpreted in the context of an education system that uses a sequence from A through F as a grading scale, where A is good and F is bad.

When people ask you whether they did a good job on a project, for example, they also want you to go beyond the literal question and recognize that they are rarely looking for an absolutely honest response. Instead, they expect a compliment of some sort, and should your response fall short of this expectation, you could be in for trouble. They assume that you know what they really mean and that your response will be tactful and courteous but not necessarily brutally frank.
One more idea for you to think about is intentionality. Before you treat another person’s behaviors as symbolic and therefore meaningful, you normally first assume that the behavior was produced consciously and deliberately. However, an accidental burp can “communicate” (as action), as can a blush, so should you treat as “communication” only those messages sent intentionally? If you are at an intersection wishing to make a left-hand turn into traffic and you see a car approaching in the opposite lane with its left-turn signal light flashing, you have to be sure that it is intentionally activated before you can interpret the meaning of that signal. In this case, your determination of intentionality could prevent a nasty accident.

In light of our relational perspective on communication, you can usually make assumptions about the level of intentionality of people you know, and you make these assumptions from what you know about them personally. But you also know that, in general, people like to look good, and an intended nasty remark is taken as worse than a simple thoughtless mistake or accidental affront (“Oops…” and “Sorry…” tend to take the sting out of an act by identifying it as mistaken or accidental and not intended to be meaningful). But does it work in such cases as “I’m sorry if this offends you, but you are really ugly,” “I’m not coming to your party tonight because it is sure to be really boring,” or “Professor, are we going to do anything important in class today?”? Think about why or why not.

You can learn from these examples that there has to be an underlying background of social practices and norms in a particular culture, group, or friendship. Most of what you do makes sense (or allows us to go beyond the literal message) because of what you take for granted about the relationship or the society in which you communicate. You make taken-for-granted assumptions about the other person and what he or she knows. All the same, you realize that there can be many arguments about intentionality and
whether someone really meant to do what he or she did (“You deliberately touched my knee, you pervert!” “No, I accidentally brushed up against it”) or really intended the consequences of what he or she did (“How could you have done that? You must have known it would hurt me!” “No, I was just very thoughtless, and I apologize”).

Given what we have just written, you can reflect on the recent suggestion by Laura Guerrero and Kory Floyd (2006) that there are really four types of communication:

- **Successful communication**: sent intentionally and interpreted accurately (i.e., in the way the sender intended)
- **Miscommunication**: sent intentionally but interpreted inaccurately (i.e., not as the sender intended)
- **Accidental communication**: sent without intent but interpreted accurately as meaning something that the “sender” was truly feeling (e.g., all students’ constant fear that they will be caught yawning during a boring talk by an instructor)
- **Attempted communication**: messages sent intentionally but not received (e.g., imagine that your partner leaves a note on your door asking for a meeting today at the Java House at 3:00 p.m. to talk about your relationship with the caveat that if you do not show up the relationship will be over, but you do not get the message)

There is a fifth type of communication too—a very dangerous one in relationships—where a message is sent unintentionally and interpreted inaccurately (e.g., a woman smiles at a casual thought passing through her mind, but a man in her presence takes it as a “come on” directed at him).

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**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION**

We have begun to unfold applications to your own life in terms of new ways to analyze the situations that you experience. Now go out for a meal in a restaurant, and take notes about the server/customer relationship and how it gets “done.” What elements of taken-for-granted cultural assumptions do you think we did not discuss here but could have? For example, what is communicated (transacted) by a server’s uniform, style of speech (bubbly or bored), friendliness, or aloofness? What deeper impressions did you form about the server’s personality? What were they based on, and why?

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**Conclusion: Communication Is . . .**

We rest our case. Even if we focused this chapter only on everyday talk of the kind introduced by the nice server with the witchety grub, you now have seen just how much more there is to communication than just one person producing and sending
a message to another like we do with texts on cell phones. Everyday communication goes beyond the literal message in all sorts of ways. For example, we saw that context and relationship affect (and so go beyond) literal messages, and vice versa. Also, communication itself transacts or constitutes something—creates, by itself, something that wasn't there before (trust, love, respect, dislike, commitment)—and goes beyond the literal. Your words are by no means the only messages; nor are they the more important element of communication—an inseparable combination of the verbal and nonverbal components. Furthermore, communication sends both content and relational information simultaneously, requires a special cultural knowledge built into the meaning and attributed to the symbols used to communicate, is organized by the shared understandings that constitute a culture, is socially constructed, and is framed by the social contexts and backgrounds of information. Communication, then, takes a lot for granted, builds a set of assumptions into messages, and demands enormous amounts of simultaneous thinking, processing, and integration by speakers and audience alike. It is personally biased, spun, or turned in a way that makes all communication into a personal rhetorical presentation of a view of reality, not by any means an objective description or representation.

Taking all this into account, then, an essential feature of communication is that it goes beyond the literal translation of messages; in fact, communication puts a lot more mess into messages. Not simply a description of events or things in the world, and not a simple transmission of a message from one person to another, communication instead involves the creation and/or sharing with at least one other person meaning that is not only contained in the literal message but associated with it by the people involved and brought in from other sources, such as culture, memory, and the past history of the relationship between the communicators.

Rephrasing this in terms we will continue to unpack, concepts to include in the definition of communication follow:

- Presentation (communication is a presentation of a preferred way of knowing or understanding the world)
- Relational (all communication is speaking into relationships)
- Going beyond (communication steps out of the present and points somewhere else, referring to objects, people, or ideas not actually in the interaction, such as things in the future, the past, or the history of a relationship or drawn from the imagination of the speaker and the audience)
- Taken for granted (communication builds in and assumes certain ways of looking at the world as preferred by your culture, your relationship partner, or yourself)
- Shared assumptions (communication involves sharing viewpoints, vocabulary, and meaning, or it would not be possible for people to communicate as interaction or transaction)

We must also include in our definition of communication the concepts of intentionality and nonverbal communication.

For now, then, we will point all these elements out and offer a temporary, working definition that we will fill out and explore: Communication is the transactional...
Chapter 1: An Overview of Everyday Communication

Communication in everyday life involves not only words but the way we speak them, as well as such nonverbal accompaniments as gestures, body posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice (rather than content of speech). In everyday communication, verbal and nonverbal communication often overlap and cannot really be separated. A medical student must learn about the muscle system, the blood, the lungs, and other systems that can be conceptually separated, but you cannot have a living body without all the parts together. Similarly, we must separate verbal and nonverbal communication to help your learning, but it makes no sense to separate them in real life. They make the whole communication package work when they are understood together, but for the purposes of this book, we must at least begin by discussing them separately, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively.

Focus Questions Revisited

- What is communication, and how does it work in your everyday life?
  We have taken a constitutive/transactive view of communication in this book, and by this we mean that communication is more than the passing of messages from one person to another. It creates something above and beyond the specific words spoken. In everyday life, communication is influenced particularly by the relationships that exist between conversational partners. These relationships and other taken-for-granted assumptions allow people to “go beyond” the literal sense of their speech and transact or constitute worlds of meaning that bind them together.

- How does communication create worlds of meaning?
  Communication is built on the recognition of shared assumptions that require the two partners to understand and take for granted certain beliefs about how the world operates. Every culture and relationship has built into it such assumptions, revealed and drawn upon in communication.

- How do the assumptions in a culture affect communication?
  Every culture has built-in assumptions about how people should be treated, activities performed, practices carried out, and emotions displayed. The assumptions about the proper and correct way to interact with other people, the behaviors that constitute rudeness or respect, and the manner in which individuals should communicate with one another all influence what is said in interaction.

- What are the properties of communication?
  Communication involves meaning, representation or presentation of facts and viewpoints, taken-for-granted assumptions, the use of symbols, and intentionality.
What does it mean to say that communication is both representational and presentational, and why is the difference important?
Communication can simply represent something that exists in the world, or it can present the speaker’s viewpoint about something. The difference between these two elements of communication is important to recognize when what are offered to us as representations of fact are indeed presentations of a viewpoint hidden in communication. Students of communication must learn to recognize the difference and be aware how presentation occurs in what appears to be representation.

What is a “frame,” and how is communication framed?
Like a frame on a picture, a frame in communication is a basic form of knowledge that provides a definition of a scenario either because the people agree on the nature of the situation or because the cultural assumptions taken for granted give them a clue. We can frame communication as being of a particular type—for example, an informal or a formal situation. The frame in which communication occurs will influence what is said and how.

What is a working definition of communication for the book?
Communication is the transactional use of symbols, influenced, guided, and understood in the context of relationships, taken-for-granted understandings, meanings, and reality that it presents and creates as ways for people to share an understanding of the world that they inhabit together.

Key Concepts
communication as action 8 frames 15
communication as interaction 8 meaning 13
communication as transaction 9 presentation 14
constitute 9 representation 14
constitutive approach to communication 9 sign 11
symbol 10

Questions to Ask Your Friends
What is “good communication,” and what is “bad communication”? What do your friends think are the main characteristics of each, and where do they believe such ideas came from in the first place?
Listen to a friend telling a story about an interaction in everyday life, and take special note of his or her method. Why did the story start the way it did, and what was taken for granted in that beginning? How did the “setup” help the story unfold and make the outcome feel “right”? 
Ask your friends to talk about an occasion when they used strategic communication/presentation. How do they think the story might have been told differently by one of the other people involved in the interaction?

**Media Links**

- In what ways do song lyrics, for example, not merely entertain us but present particular ways of living, particular attitudes, and particular styles?
- Do media ads encourage us to be satisfied with what we already have, or do they present a need to acquire more?
- Do news stories represent or present facts, and how is their presentation made important (with words? images? frames?)? Find some examples, and bring them to class.

**Ethical Issues**

- What assumptions appear to be built into other people’s speech concerning race, sex, age, power, and justice?
- What assumptions about these things can you now discover in your own talk?
- In what ways might it be unethical to use some of what you have learned in this chapter?

**Answers to Photo Captions**

- **Photo 1.1**  
  Answer to photo caption on page 4: The woman’s open palm suggests she has just raised a question for the salesman, and he is leaning forward slightly to deal with it. She also has titled her head to one side and backward, a whole-head equivalent of raising an eyebrow, distancing herself from what the salesman is saying, and her smile leaves her eyes wide open. The man’s eyes, not so wide open, make him appear less skeptical.

- **Photo 1.2**  
  Answer to photo caption on page 7: Ethnic and age differences are immediately apparent. One of the men is eating ethnically related food while the other is “out of place.” Notice the different position of the chopsticks, one of which is “correct” and the other not quite right. One man is conventionally dressed, and the other is conveying a culture of rebellion signified by hairstyle, body piercing, and tattoos.

- **Photo 1.3**  
  Answer to photo caption on page 12: “Stop” is symbolized in the placement of the sign at a junction, the sign’s hexagonal shape, and its colors of red fringed with white.
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Photo 1.4 • Answer to photo caption on page 17: The women are probably old friends as demonstrated by their physical closeness, close gaze, mirroring of posture (both holding their cup with both hands at about the same height), and obvious enjoyment of the conversation. The fact that the speaker is looking at the listener while talking from such a close distance is a sign of intimacy.

Student Study Site

Visit the study site at www.sagepub.com/bocstudy for e-flashcards, practice quizzes, and other study resources.

Note

1. You will notice as we go through the book that when we refer to someone else’s work or ideas, we will use this kind of format, with the authors’ surnames and a date. The date gives the year in which the original paper or book was published. Look for the full reference at the end of the chapter; this format is used in most social science textbooks and professional writing. You may also be asked to use this format when you write your own papers.

References
