

# ***Communication Theory***

EASTERN AND WESTERN  
PERSPECTIVES

Edited by  
D. LAWRENCE KINCAID



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HUMAN COMMUNICATION  
RESEARCH SERIES

**Communication Theory**  
**EASTERN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

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# Communication Theory

## EASTERN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

**D. Lawrence Kincaid**

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Albany, New York



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# Contents

<b>Contributors</b>	xi
<b>Preface</b>	xiii
<b>1. Introduction and Initial Insights</b>	1
<i>Donald P. Cushman and D. Lawrence Kincaid</i>	
<b>I. ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION THEORY</b>	
China	11
Korea	13
Japan	16
India	19
<b>2. Chinese Philosophy and Contemporary Human Communication Theory</b>	
<i>Chung-Ying Cheng</i>	
Introduction	23
Chinese Philosophy and Communication Theory	24
The Embodiment of Reason in Experience	26
Epistemological–Pragmatic Unity	29
Part–Whole Interdetermination	31
The Dialectic Completion of Relative Polarities	34
Infinite Interpretation	36
Symbolic Reference	40

<b>3. Communication in Chinese Narrative</b>	
<i>James S. Fu</i>	
Introduction	45
Communication in <i>The True Story of Ah Q</i>	47
Communication and Communion	51
<b>4. Contemporary Chinese Philosophy and Political Communication</b>	
<i>Donald P. Cushman</i>	
Introduction	57
The Philosophical Principles of Chinese Communism	58
The Structure and Function of China's Political Communication System	62
China's Political Communication System: Effectiveness and Problems	67
Summary	69
<b>5. Korean Philosophy and Communication</b>	
<i>June-Ock Yum</i>	
Introduction	71
Confucianism in Korea	72
Impact of Confucianism on Communication	75
Korean Buddhism	80
Impact of Buddhism on Communication	83
Conclusion	85
<b>6. The Practice of <i>Uye-Ri</i> in Interpersonal Relationships</b>	
<i>June-Ock Yum</i>	
Introduction	87
Confucianism and <i>Uye-Ri</i> Ideology	88
Practice of <i>Uye-Ri</i> in Korea Today	90
Communication Patterns and <i>Uye-Ri</i>	95
Conclusion	98
<b>7. The Teachings of Yi Yulgok: Communication from a Neo-Confucian Perspective</b>	
<i>Sang-Hee Lee</i>	
Introduction	101
Political Philosophy	103
Communication Systems during the Time of Yi Yulgok	105
Thoughts on Communication	109

<b>8. Some Characteristics of the Japanese Way of Communication</b>	
<i>Akira Tsujimura</i>	
Introduction	115
<i>Ishin-denshin</i> : Communication without Language	116
Social Causes of Taciturnity	119
Indirect Communication and Respect for Reverberation	122
<i>Kuuki</i> : The Constraint of Mood	124
Conclusion	125
<b>9. Indirect Speech Acts of the Japanese</b>	
<i>Keizo Okabe</i>	
Introduction	127
Speech Act Theory	128
Indirect Speech Acts	131
The Practice of Indirect Communication in Japanese Society	134
<b>10. Communication within the Japanese Business Organization</b>	
<i>Randy Y. Hirokawa</i>	
Introduction	137
Openness of Communication among Employees	138
Factors Accounting for Openness	139
Deliberate Ambiguity of Communication among Employees	141
Factors Accounting for Deliberate Ambiguity	145
Conclusion	148
<b>11. The Guiding Image in Indian Culture and Its Implications for Communication</b>	
<i>Wimal Dissanayake</i>	
Introduction	151
Eight Guiding Principles	154
Implications for an Indian Theory of Communication	158
<b>12. Communication in India: The Tenets of <i>Sadharanikaran</i></b>	
<i>J. S. Yadava</i>	
Introduction	161
Traditional Communication Systems	162
The Contemporary Perspective	163
Indian Communication Philosophy	164
The Five Tenets of <i>Sadharanikaran</i>	166
The Interface Today	169

**13. The Practice of *Antyodaya* in Agricultural Extension Communication in India**

*Abdur Rahim*

Introduction	173
Hinduism and Indian Society	174
Agricultural Extension in India	176
The Law of <i>Karma</i>	179
Roots and Flowers of <i>Antyodaya</i>	180
Conclusion	182

**II. PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION THEORY FROM THE UNITED STATES**

**14. Paradigms for Communication and Development with Emphasis on Autopoiesis**

*Klaus Krippendorff*

Introduction	189
The Control Paradigm	190
The Network–Convergence Paradigm	192
The Information-Seeking Paradigm	194
The Paradigm of Autopoiesis	196
Changes in the Ecosphere	199
Changes in the Noosphere	201
Autonomy in Ecosphere–Noosphere Interactions	203
Summary and Conclusion	206

**15. The Convergence Theory of Communication, Self-Organization, and Cultural Evolution**

*D. Lawrence Kincaid*

Introduction	209
Entropy	211
Nonequilibrium Thermodynamics and Self-Organization	213
Communication and Cultural Evolution	214
Implications of the Theory	219

**16. The Rules Approach to Communication Theory: A Philosophical and Operational Perspective**

*Donald P. Cushman*

Introduction	223
Philosophical Assumptions	224
Self-Concept as a Cybernetic Control System for Human Action	228
Conclusion	233

<b>17. Acculturation and Communication Competence</b>	
<i>W. Barnett Pearce and Kyung-wha Kang</i>	
Introduction	235
Acculturation	237
Communication Competence	239
Conclusion	243
<b>18. The Prospect for Cultural Communication</b>	
<i>Gerry Philipson</i>	
Introduction	245
The Nature of Cultural Communication	249
Forms and Functions of Cultural Communication	250
Variation in Cultural Communication Style	253
<b>19. Interpersonal Cognition, Message Goals, and Organization of Communication: Recent Constructivist Research</b>	
<i>Jesse G. Delia</i>	
Introduction	255
Human Action, Interaction, and Communication Are Organized by Interpretive Schemes	256
Schemes for Understanding Other Persons Play an Important Role in Organizing Interaction and Communication, Particularly at the Level of Goals and Strategies	257
Variation in Modes of Conceptualizing Persons Is Important in the Operation of Many Discourse-Organizing Schemes	270
Summary	271
<b>20. Dialogue on the Nature of Causality, Measurement, and Human Communication Theory</b>	
<i>Joseph Woelfel and D. Lawrence Kincaid</i>	
Introduction	275
The Dialogue	276
<b>III. COMMUNICATION THEORY: EAST–WEST SYNTHESIS</b>	
<b>21. Development of the Western Model: Toward a Reconciliation of Eastern and Western Perspectives</b>	
<i>Joseph Woelfel</i>	
Introduction	299
The Common Model	300

The Aristotelian Model	302
The Cartesian Model	308
The Relativistic Model	312
Implications for Communication Theory	314
<b>22. The Double-Swing Model of Intercultural Communication between the East and the West</b>	
<i>Muneo Jay Yoshikawa</i>	
Introduction	319
Modes of Intercultural Encounter and Communication	320
The Development of Dialogical Thought	322
Buddhistic Perspective on Paradoxical Relations	324
The Double-Swing Model	326
Implications for Intercultural Communication	328
Summary	329
<b>23. Communication East and West: Points of Departure</b>	
<i>D. Lawrence Kincaid</i>	
Introduction	331
Unit of Analysis	332
The Consequence/Purpose of Communication	333
The Limits of Language and Cognition	336
Emotion and Rationality	338
Human Relationships	339
Conclusion	340
<b>References</b>	341
<b>Index</b>	355

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## **Preface**

The field of communication has entered one of the most exciting periods in its history. The steady, rapid pace of technological development continues to break down the natural barriers of time and space that once made communication on a global scale so difficult. As the natural barriers diminish, the political and cultural barriers seem more formidable than ever.

The number of people studying communication has reached critical new proportions. New ideas challenging the old come from all parts of the world today. Those who listen to many voices will find the reward in the improved quality and scope of their own work.

This book is a positive response to the demand that has developed during the past few years for theoretical approaches to communication which are compatible with the political and cultural realities of Asia and which clearly differentiate between communication as it is practiced in the East and the West, especially the United States. The main purpose of this book is to broaden our thinking about communication as a fundamental process of society.

A look at communication theory from different cultural perspectives will contribute greatly to the future development of the field. For many readers the ideas presented in this book will be new and quite exciting, challenging and stimulating their own thinking about communication. New students of communication will find a richness heretofore unknown.

We have taken an inclusive approach to "theory." Theory is something to be developed, not a finished product. A formal theory consists of several equally important parts: intuitive notions or presuppositions,

more precisely defined constructs, postulates or hypotheses that relate the constructs, deduced laws, and experimental tests of the hypotheses. The authors of some of the chapters in this book limit their discussion to basic presuppositions from a particular cultural perspective or define useful new constructs for theory construction. Others formulate postulates or hypotheses capable of empirical test.

Presupposing and defining phenomena a particular way is a prerequisite for perception and intelligent discussion. Good concepts allow us to see new things or to see old things in a new light. At the same time they divert our attention or blind us from seeing other things. Escaping from this paradoxical situation is no easy task. Progress can sometimes be made by borrowing formal language systems developed in other domains of science, as when biologists apply the language of cybernetics to their own problems or physicists apply the concept of evolution to theirs. One who comes to understand and appreciate concepts developed in different cultures and language systems from their own, the “*Tao*” or “feedback” or “dialectical materialism,” has gained a new set of tools to see new phenomena in his or her own culture or see the familiar in a new way. By forcing constructs and relationships into the English language which were originally developed in other language systems, we create a new leverage for theory building. Those who pursue what they are introduced to in this book will find their vision of communication enriched forever.

It would be impossible to cover all of the possible theoretical perspectives of both the East and the West in one volume. The Eastern perspective is represented by discussions from four cultures: China, Korea, Japan, and India. The Western perspective is limited to recent trends in North American thinking. This structure leaves room for the inclusion of several chapters that discuss ideas held in common by the East and the West. Together, the full set of chapters makes an important contribution to the study of intercultural communication, where cultural differences must be clearly understood and, if possible, transcended.

Once the idea for this work was set in motion, it could be realized only with the help of a great many people. The East–West Center’s Communication Institute, Honolulu, Hawaii, sponsored the international seminar from which many of the papers originated, and Tokyo University sponsored a second symposium in Yokohama, Japan, which allowed the work to continue.

I would especially like to acknowledge the contributions of Chung-Ying Cheng and Joe Woelfel, who have been with the project since the beginning, and Akira Tsujimura and Keizo Okabe, who gave so much support, and all who participated in the two seminars and who contributed papers.

**Communication Theory**  
**EASTERN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

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## **CHAPTER 1**

# **Introduction and Initial Insights**

*Donald P. Cushman and D. Lawrence Kincaid*

Human communication theory can be productively explored from a variety of perspectives. It is the purpose of this essay to explore the insights which are provided by examining communication theory from Eastern and Western perspectives. The knowledge on which our discussion is based comes from the papers presented in this same volume which were written by scholars from both Asia and the United States for the purpose of enhancing our understanding of communication theory.

Before entering into the main portion of our discussion we are in need of some analytic tools for exploring what is meant by the concepts, communication and theory. Both of these concepts are at once ambiguous and conventional in their meaning. They are ambiguous in that each of these terms is employed to designate several rather diverse conceptualizations. They are conventional in that there is considerable agreement among philosophers, theorists, and practitioners as to the elements which make up each of these diverse conceptualizations. Let us therefore begin by defining the terms communication and theory in their most general sense and then provide a conceptualization of the elements involved in each of their different and yet conventional usages.

*Communication* in its most general sense refers to a process in which *information* is shared by two or more persons and which has *consequences* for one or more of the persons involved. Much of the ambiguity and controversy regarding the nature of communication stems from the different ways that "information" is defined, and the different approaches that are taken toward the "consequences" of communication. Kincaid (Chapter 15, this volume), for instance, focuses on the physical nature of information, defining it as "a difference in matter-energy which affects uncertainty . . ." To him, the most important consequences of communication are *between* the persons involved, in terms of their mutual understanding, mutual agreement, and collective action.

This recent approach to communication may be contrasted with that of Cushman and Whiting (1972), who define communication as "the successful transfer of symbolic information." This definition focuses attention on the act of transfer and the nature of success, especially about for whom the transfer is successful: source, receiver, or both? In fact, the introduction of the term, "success," emphasizes an instrumental aspect of communication which is so often associated with Western ways of thinking in general. If success is limited to external criteria, to the effective manipulation of the external world including other people, then the Western bias of this definition is evident and can be traced back to Aristotle's principles of rhetoric. On the other hand, if success is interpreted more broadly we can make room for a greater variety of approaches to communication, perhaps even those which are compatible with Eastern ways of thinking.

First, successful communication can be claimed to have taken place when an individual can subjectively make sense out of his perceptions of experiences and incoming messages. Such a conception of successful communication focuses on the internal information processing capability of an individual. It is communication rooted in *psychological processes* and represents an individual's own subjective estimate that the symbolic patterns confronting that individual have been interpreted correctly. Such personal understanding occurs when one reads a poem or practices meditation, from either external or internal experiences. Understanding gives a personal interpretation to the patterns of information taken from those experiences. From this perspective successful communication is a matter of personal understanding.

Second, successful communication can be said to have occurred when two or more individuals interactively arrive at a common set of interpretations for patterns of information. Such a conception of successful communication focuses on agreements between individuals. It is communication rooted in social consensus and represents two or more individuals' estimates that the information pattern confronting them has been inter-

preted correctly as a consequence of their interaction. From this perspective successful communication is a matter of mutual understanding and agreement.

Third, successful communication can be said to have occurred when some institution of authority provides a criteria for the correct interpretation of patterns of information. This is communication rooted in institutional authority and represents imposed standards or conventions for interpretation. Examples of institutional conventions for correct interpretations of symbolic patterns are found in various religious ceremonies, cultural conventions for greeting others, and ideological interpretations of government policy. From this perspective, successful communication is a matter of institutional understanding.

Human beings can depend on psychological, social or institutional processes and criteria, or combinations of all three to arrive at coherent, meaningful interpretations of experience based on their shared patterns of information. Defined this broadly, "success" is a question of *how* understanding is reached as a consequence of communication.

The concept *theory* like that of communication has both general and specific conventional uses. In its most general sense, theory is simply a coherent set of hypothetical, conceptual, and pragmatic principles which function as a frame of reference for some field of inquiry. A *principle* is a propositional statement about some aspect of reality which provides a basis for reasoning or a guide for action. A principle serves reasoning to the extent that other statements or propositions can be logically derived from it. In other words, a principle is the ultimate basis from which other statements take their origin.

In the case of scientific theory, we can be much more formal and specific: a theory is a collection of theorems. "A theorem is a proposition which is a strict logical consequence of certain definitions and other propositions" (Rapoport, 1974, p. 260). The logical validity of any given theorem is ultimately derived from assertions which are not proved but simply assumed and terms which are not defined but simply listed. In science as opposed to other fields of study, some of the terms must be related extensionally to referents and at least some of the assertions must be empirically verifiable. The accuracy of these assertions about the empirical world is what makes a scientific theory successful. On the other hand, it is the nature of the theorems that makes a theory part of an exact science. The exact sciences have completely rigid rules for deducing theorems, usually mathematical rules. "It is the rigidity of these rules, not the accuracy of the assertions or precision of measurements which makes an exact science" (Rapoport, 1974, p. 261). Because of its deductive nature, one of the interesting aspects of theory is that none of the statements (theorems,