

On Proxemics and Territoriality in Communicative Behavior of Man – A Communiqué

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1. Introduction

Educational programs tend to be introductory with intent of broadening knowledge at later stages, but also tend to be more specialized in order to present students with the possibility of applying the necessary knowledge and tools in the analysis of selected materials. The following description of a course is an example of such an approach where students are taught a particular choice of theories relating to human communicative behavior in order to acquire knowledge and the ability to analyze various proxemic and territorial behaviors present in the urban environment.

2. Communicative behavior of man

Due to our constitution, human beings possess a particular set of senses with varied specialization and sensitivity to stimuli. As we are descendants of fruit eaters and scavengers, the sight is our primary sense, followed by the auditory and olfactory. Although our ability to recognize shapes, textures, and temperatures is also impressive, the tactile is limited to our skin and our closest vicinity, making the touch inferior in comparison with the previously mentioned senses. The taste, finally, from the perspective of communication, is nothing more but a confirmation of everything else that has already been assessed by other senses. One could also mention the sixth sense relating it to our knowledge and/or education which enable us to draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of tiniest stimulus even when registered by a single sense.

When human beings are treated as a society, and communication between both individuals and groups is considered the primary focus of an analysis, then it is necessary to mention language as the main means

of transmitting information. Moreover, language together with other non-linguistic behaviors functions as the unifying element enabling societies to thrive and progress despite the obvious inability to come in sensual contact with all members of such vast groups as nations. It seems that it is the combination of language as the means of communication together with the sight and the auditory channels of communication at the core of studying human communicative behavior. For this reason it seems appropriate to divide signs and messages present in our environment into those dwelling on the sight or the auditory together with references to language. In result one receives: visual non-verbal communication, non-verbal non-visual communication, verbal non-visual communication, and visual verbal communication (For a variety of reasons, “verbal” is preferred to “linguistic” as there are numerous non-linguistic verbal behaviors that otherwise could not be included in the following analysis).

2.1 Channels of communication

2.1.1. Visual non-verbal communication

The first of dominant channels of communication consists of those signals, signs, and messages which are perceived by the sight and which lack the verbal (and linguistic) element. If face-to-face interactions are taken into account, one could list all the visual characteristics of interlocutors: their body language, posture, constitution, clothing, jewels and other elements signifying status or identity, health indicators, etc. In accordance with the proverb “one picture is worth a thousand words”, a glimpse at a person gives off (to refer to Ervin Goffman's terminology) a significant number of signs that can become meaningful to a skilled reader.

There is, however, another facet to visual non-verbal communication when it is not the other human being at the centre of one's focus but signs left by them. Urban environment is a cornucopia of signals, signs, and messages which are visual in nature and are not based on verbal or linguistic communication. From obvious lines on streets, to post boxes attached to walls, to whole buildings, and arrangement of city districts, all elements of our surrounding within cities seem to communicate a plethora of meanings.

2.1.2. Non-verbal non-visual communication

Non-verbal non-visual communication type of communication is usually noticed while traveling across a foreign country in connection with a language barrier. The multitude of sounds present in cities is amazing, however, they usually can be limited to just a scant group produced by machines, tools, and vehicles. From the perspective of communicative behavior of man, this type of communication seems to be of little interest as only a selection of sounds created by, e.g., a man mowing his lawn or a youth starting his motorbike, can be connected to people. Usually the only relation that can be found is that of status or physical work indicated by sounds. There is also a fairly impressive group of olfactory signs present at particular places, times, or in relation to people, but as mentioned above, these are purely non-linguistic, and are of little interest in the presented analysis.

2.1.3. Verbal non-visual communication

Typically approached as the most important, this mode of communication is usually concentrated around language. It would be highly difficult to claim that it is not our daily routine to chat and converse, discuss and argue, that constitutes the major part of verbal non-visual communication. Nevertheless, there is a substantial undertone the non-linguistic verbal signs may give to linguistic messages. Depending on the tone and voice qualities, the extralinguistic element of speech enables to judge if the utterance is ironic or not, if it is an attempted lie or just boasting. Moreover, one can fairly accurately pinpoint the interlocutor's age, sex, health, and size, together with some hints about such remote issues as profession, e.g., in case of priests or newsreaders. Although this type of communication does not seem to be central to inter-human exchanges, it focuses attention on particular attitudes and prepares ground for further interactions.

2.1.4. Visual verbal communication

In practice, when urban environment is taken into account, visual verbal communication seems to be of primary importance. The sheer amount of signs and messages posted on our streets and on building façades makes the previous modes of communication of secondary importance. When standing on a street it is impossible to discern individual talks around us, the auditory and olfactory provide us with the

background understanding of our surrounding, and it is the omnipresent notes at lampposts, bus stops and shop windows that are instantly recognized and that can be read and analyzed without any delay most of the time.

In addition, there is a vast number of signs that usually are unnoticed, that are transparent to the majority of passers-by. These are the signs left by and for various municipal institutions and servicemen who maintain the urban environment for us. There are also signs left by various non-municipal institutions, industries and commercial enterprises directed towards their employees – again most of those notices are transparent and unnoticed by those who are not intended addressees of such messages. Finally, there is a large group of previously mentioned non-verbal visual messages which can easily be transformed into particular utterances or that even have specific optional verbal equivalents. To some extent these could be treated as semi-verbal visual signs in urban environment. In general, it is all those signs together, creating an amalgamate or a conglomerate, that comprise the largest group of urban signs.

The division of various types of communication offered above also deals with the evolution of human communication. As far as we can envisage it, at the beginning, early humans communicated using grunts and gestures, so the verbal and the visual without (strong) linguistic undertones were at the centre of communicative competence. Later, when language developed, the creation of complicated sets of beliefs and their dissemination became possible. Next, when script was used for the first time, and later, when print became widespread, we could notice a return to the visual without losing the primacy of the linguistic element. Finally, in modern times, our cities give off a number of signs referring to us as society, institutions, and individuals. This is achieved by a collection of signs, primarily visual and verbal in their nature, with some non-verbal elements inherited from the beginnings of human communicative behavior. In addition, there is the whole sphere of online communication which again is primarily visual and linguistic.

2.2 Constitutive elements of signs

Students should acquire in depth knowledge of various theories of signs and semiotics at the same time. However, taking that part of the course for granted, it is more appropriate to concentrate here on a particular method of reading urban signs. As already mentioned signals, signs, and

messages can be transmitted via numerous channels, some of which are more human-oriented than others. For the purpose of this course, the core issue that students should be familiarized with is how to read and analyze those modes of communication that indicate territorial and proxemic behaviors. In connection to previously mentioned dominance of the visual verbal messages one should concentrate on the elements of various notes posted within urban environment and their relation to space used in communicative terms.

Richard and Suzie Wong Scollon presented a detailed analysis of various elements of visual signs together with social bounds of the reading process in their *Discourses in Place* (2003). The first and most important approach defended by the authors is the fact that everything around us is a sign, hence, a new term of geosemiotics is proposed as adequate to deal with that instance. Nevertheless, *Discourses in Place* offers a particular and detailed approach to visual verbal signs on their own without making too many references to everything around that could possibly become a sign standing for something else beside itself. In due course, they argue that signs are read in a two-fold manner; firstly they are attributed to a particular discourse and secondly they are analysed on the basis of their physical features. In short, the approach presented by Richard and Suzie Wong Scollon (83, 116, 129, 142, 167) could be shown, with some alterations, as follows:

discourses

- municipal regulatory (directed to the public)
- municipal informative (direct to the general public)
- municipal infrastructural (directed to various town institutions)
- commercial and institutional (non-municipal)
- transgressive (not inherent to messages unlike in *Discourses in Place*)

modality

- color saturation, differentiation, and modulation
- size and shape
- contextualization
- representation
- depth, illumination, and brightness
- code preferences / composition of information
 - centered: circular, triptych, centre–margin
 - polarized: top–bottom (ideal–real), left–right (given–new)

earlier–later
 inscription
 fonts and typeface, letter form
 material qualities: permanence, durability, newness, quality
 layering; add-ons or extensions
 state changes

emplacement
 decontextualized
 transgressive
 situated: exophoric, situated ('feng-shui')

Depending on a particular sign, some or most of the above become meaningful or influence the final meaning derived from a conglomerate of signs. What is of interest to this course is the fact that modality can be used to make a sign or elements of a message stand out, or hint particular feelings and moods, or even refer the sign or its meaning to a wider context or discourse. Physical alterations influence not only the form and material which signs are made of, but the meaning signs are supposed to convey. In this manner, depending on the immediate context and available discourses, some elements are not constitutive to a sign, while others, seemingly of no greater importance, may shift the final reading or interrupt the reading process.

It is worth adding what was already mentioned in section 2.1 of this text. As our ancestors were mostly fruit eaters, we have a predisposition towards noticing particular colors and shapes in our vicinity. A crafty sign creator may utilize that knowledge by posting signs that should dominate space, subdue other signs, and, often subconsciously, change our behaviors. By the same token, signs that possess no distinctive feature may become noticeable only due to a particular emplacement.

3. Territoriality and proxemics

So far various channels and modes of communication were presented in reference to communicative behavior of man. As the text, and the course described by it, is supposed to focus on spatial dimensions of communicative behaviors, it is necessary to consider how much and if at all humans are territorial creatures. On the basis of this investigation it should be possible to analyze how and why we use space and the

arrangement of objects and people in space in order to communicate various meanings.

3.1 Territoriality

At first it must be stated that territorial behaviors are typical of those animals that do not live in large groups, usually predators. However, even when individual representatives of some species are not highly territorial, it is still possible for a group of animals to be characterized by territoriality. Territoriality can be understood as “a basic concept in the study of animal behavior, [and it] is usually defined as behavior by which an organism characteristically lays claim to an area and defends it against members of its own species” (E.T. Hall *The Hidden Dimension* 1966: 7). For instance, apes seem to use space rather freely and fight between each other for it only to show dominance rather than for any more concrete reason. Nevertheless, when the same apes are treated collectively as a group, a small society, they appear to establish very precise routes, destinations and boundaries of their territories, which will be defended to utmost ferocity when trespassed.

The essence of the concept [of territory] is that an animal or group of animals “defends” all or part of its range. Thus there are two major components: space and the active defence of that space. Many animals maintain exclusive areas by vocalizing, displaying, or in some way signalling to possible intruders, and very rarely, if ever, by actual fighting at borders. (L.M. Fedigan *Primate Paradigms* 1982: 95)

The case of human beings is inconclusive at first as we do not seem to possess many of the traits that would characterize our territorial ancestors. “[T]erritoriality is a 'group characteristic' arising out of the cohabitation of individuals living in a given locality” (Linda Marie Fedigan *Primate Paradigms* 1982: 76). However, due to high numbers of people cramped in cities, and due to the millennia of civilization based on deteriorating individual territoriality, it may be claimed that we are devoid of territorial communicative behavior at least on the individual level. Wars may be treated as extreme measures taken in order to provide resources but not space. Nevertheless, it seems much more reasonable to believe that while our territoriality is not as strong as in the case of predators or our ancestors, we have not lost the feeling of space, objects present and placed in this space, and the ownership of both the space and objects included within its boundaries.

For this reason more spacious cars are believed to be better, to represent higher status, even when they are much more difficult to navigate in narrow streets of European cities. By the same token, occupying higher positions usually means being introduced to a bigger desk and a larger office. In extreme situations top officials occupy vast rooms which symbolize nothing more but status. As stated by the authors of *Discourses in Place*, “all of the signs and symbols take a major part of their meaning from how and where they are placed” (2). And this is predominantly the major territorial communication in our times – the bigger space occupied by you and your belongings, the more important, influential and rich you must be.

There is however a more down-to-earth communicative usage of territories usually visible while threatening or in combat. There is a thin line dividing the fleeting distance from the defense distance and when crossed threats become not only annoying but dangerous; attackers invading our closest space must face immediate response. This seems to be true both for territories of nations or clans, as well as of small groups and individuals. In this manner it can be seen that while shading civilization understood as high culture, and when succumbing to our animal instincts, space and its size around us become meaningful and on top of that owned and felt as physical extension of particular individuals.

3.2 Proxemics

In such a manner territorial behaviors explain why we should approach various proxemic behaviors as communicative. They can simply be viewed as our extension or a part of human territoriality understood in terms of *Human Territoriality* by Robert David Sacks (1986: 140) as “the use of space, to affect, organize, and control behavior” (of some or all interactants within our range). So there is more to proxemics than just arranging objects in space, than including and excluding some of them and some individuals or groups. Proxemics deals with territories around us in a much more systematized way. As depicted by Edward T. Hall in *The Hidden Dimension* (1966) human beings carry around four different zones or bubbles, into which particular people are allowed or not, and in which specific activities, communicative and linguistic, can be performed or not.

Hall claimed that there are four major distances in human interactions with and perception of space and other people within that space:

Intimate, Private, Social, and Public. Each further distance is larger than the previous one and its boundary is established at larger intervals. What is of prime importance to this text and the course is the fact that with each distance there is a different quality and type of behaviors deemed appropriate. Gestures, postures or voice quality adequate for informal exchanges with a close friend are scorned at the Public distance which is neither private nor confidential. By the same token, what is expected in the Social distance (looking at a person from feet to head, speaking loudly, gesturing, walking around, etc.) is unthinkable in the Intimate distance. The distance must stay in accord with the behavior and the behavior must fall within an appropriate distance. Approaching the same issue of interaction but from a different perspective, Erving Goffman (cited in Scollon & Scollon 2003: 45–47, 55–64) proposed eleven units of interaction order based on physical and spatial relationship between interlocutors: single, with, file or procession, queue, contact, service encounter, conversational encounter, meeting, people-processing encounter, platform event, and celebrative occasion.

Moreover, language used in each distance seems to differ from that characteristic of other zones. There seems to be a change in register, style, diction, voice quality, amplitude, breathing, and so on and so forth. Again, failing to apply particular expressions together with extralinguistic features of verbal and non-verbal communication will violate basic rules of conduct. In due course it is possible to argue that particular phrases or styles are associated with specific territories, territorial behaviors, and proxemic distances. Hence, an adequate or unskilled usage of those may change the course of the whole communicative process by enhancing mutual comprehension and accelerating communication, or by hindering exchanges or even making any further communicative behavior impossible.

4. Verbal proxemics in urban discourse

As stated in the introduction to this text, there is a growing fragmentation of courses due to the vastness of present theories, materials to be analyzed and studied, and also due to increasing specialization. Therefore, the course presented in this text is supposed to culminate communicative and territorial investigations with the introduction of verbal proxemics. More precisely, the analysis and examples presented so far stress the necessity to analyze urban signs or even collections of

texts characteristic of cities as central to contemporary semiotic studies. For this reason, students reaching the end of this course should be capable of combining the previously mentioned theories and approaches in a proxemic analysis of signs found in urban environment.

In the light of this text it is believed that verbal signs within the urban milieu are characterized by a particular proxemic force. This force can be measured and assessed on the basis of linguistic analysis dwelling on discourse recognition and discourse analysis, contextualization, and human territoriality. Similarly to perlocutionary force in Speech Act Theory, the proxemic force becomes an integral and indispensable component of a message influencing the final reading of its meaning. At the basic level a message may be most polite while a particular positioning of it may turn the whole communicative behavior into a threat or an insult. By the same token a notice 'Get Lost' at a shop window, when accompanied by a black-white-red picture of Emily LeStrange (fictional counterculture character by Rob Reger and his company Cosmic Debris Etc. Inc.) creates an inclusive Private bubble welcoming customers willing to invest time and effort in a more subversive reading of the message that is negative and impolite only at the surface level.

5. Conclusion

As the methods of education, curricula, and especially access to global education has changed tremendously within the last few decades, it is obligatory to prepare new ways of teaching. On one hand the discoveries and theories of previous centuries must be recalled and presented to students just as it was done in preceding decades. On the other new approaches to teaching, methodology, curriculum organization, technologies, and most importantly to communication within highly developed urbanized societies necessitate specialization of courses in order to meet the demand of students. Within a broad scope of semiotics, this course is supposed to dwell on numerous theories of sign and communication in order to promote modern interdisciplinary approaches to semiotics and pragmatics on the example of verbal proxemics.

Selected Literature

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