



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)

Annenberg School for Communication

5-16-1995

On the Embodiment of Recursive Communication (Theory)

Klaus Krippendorff

University of Pennsylvania, klaus.krippendorff@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krippendorff, K. (1995). On the Embodiment of Recursive Communication (Theory). *Cybernetics and Circularity, Chicago, May 1995. A conference in Honor of Heinz von Foerster*, 1-2. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/826

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/826
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

On the Embodiment of Recursive Communication (Theory)

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

On the Embodiment of Recursive Communication (Theory)

by Klaus Krippendorff, University of Pennsylvania. 1995.5.16

(1) **Embodiment.** 'Communication' is a word that occurs in the context of other words and in the presence of people speaking and listening, that is, being in a particular coordination relative to each other. When the speaking of communication is the communication spoken of, we are in what Heinz von Foerster calls an "eigen behavior" at which the operand is stable under its operation and at which its self-reference collapses into unity. But this is also a condition in which a process is *embodied*, here, in those speaking and listening to each other.

Extending Humberto Maturana's proposition that speaks of autopoietic systems as occurring in a medium, I suggest:

All recursive processes must be carried by a medium.

The relationship between a process and its medium can be described as perturbations, emphasizing the unpredictability of its effects, as disturbances, emphasizing its undesirable influences, but it can also be described in terms of whether the medium supports (affords) or objects to (contests, resists or vetoes) the meandering of a process.

Formal or mathematical theories ignore the embodiment of what they speak about precisely because the logic of a medium is incommensurate with such theories. Blaming the medium for causing breakdowns or for preventing the realization of a theory would make no sense otherwise. Understanding (talking of or coping with) the interaction of logically incommensurate domains is not easy.

(2) **Position.** I wish to distinguish two positions from which to see, act and talk: the position of a **detached observer** and the position of an **involved participant**. They roughly correlate with the distinction between outsiders and insiders to a phenomenon, between talk from a third person perspective and talk from a first person perspective, between objectivity without and with parenthesis, and between first and second-order cybernetics. They also differ in the experience of agency. Typically, scientific observers fail to acknowledge their taking any position.

From the position of a detached observer, understanding communication involves a logic of composition of known components, each of which may have a logic of its own. Since a logic of composition is not comprehensible in terms of the logic of its components -- the exception being when all these logics are the same or at least commensurate, a convenient assumption used to justify positionless accounts of them -- detached observers are led into superior roles and their *monological* constructions of other humans are no different from those of machines.

From the position of an involved participant, understanding communication must (1) acknowledge the inaccessibility of the logic of Others (being any one's medium) and, hence, the need to listen to a polyphony of voices, and (2) admit active participation in the ensuing coordination between self and Others. Here, (3) communication becomes an open-ended strategy for mutually informed agents, journeying through *parallel constructions of hypothetical worlds*, not one.

(3) **Constitution.** Constitution is definition from within, saying something into attention, enacting it into being, and understanding what it thereby has become. I suggest all social phenomena are constituted in the understanding of their participants, communication being one of them.

I prefer to locate communication in what its participants bring to it. Drawing on Maturana's "Everything is said by an observer" and Paul Watzlawick et al.'s "You cannot not communicate," I say:

Everything said is communicated to someone understanding it as such.

This makes communication dependent on the "act of acceptance as such" (Gabriel Stotzenberg) by someone holding a construction of what communication is. But it says nothing about the embodiment of the process. Hence the proposition:

Human communication is constituted in the recursive unfolding of communication constructions, held by its participants (including of each other), into coordinations they recognize and can explain to each other in terms of communication.

Appropriately, this proposition is silent on the nature of participants' constructions (logics). It merely asserts the need for conceptions of communication to be enacted into intertwining processes as long as these processes, their explanations and contestations are not terminated in the medium of all Others. There is no presumption of hierarchy. None is superior to any Other. There is no need for dual world constructions. The proposition defines communication as a recursive practice but also as a multilogical and embodied one. However, as with all definitions, it is stated from a third person perspective. This, I want to overcome.

(4) **Otherness.** One can *tolerate* Others' otherness, one can even *celebrate* Others' otherness (Edward Sampson), but I think neither accords the *respect* I prefer to receive myself. To me, this respect is born in one's commitment to listen, to avoid acting on fixed theories of Others, to open spaces for many voices to be heard, and to collaborate in maintaining the possibilities of continued conversations. Most importantly, this entails the willingness to travel through many incommensurate logics, from my constructions of reality to that of Others and back. Increasing the recursive depth of discourse starts with seeing myself through Others eyes. The proposition on recursive communication invites these articulations. Monological constructions of communication retard them. I suggest that such interactively evolving constructions of discourse are at the root of second-order cybernetics.

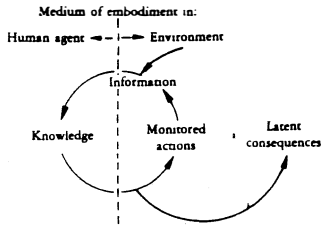
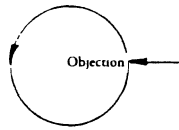
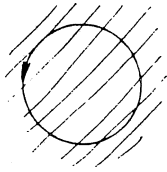


Figure 4.2 Giddens' construction of a knowledgeable agent

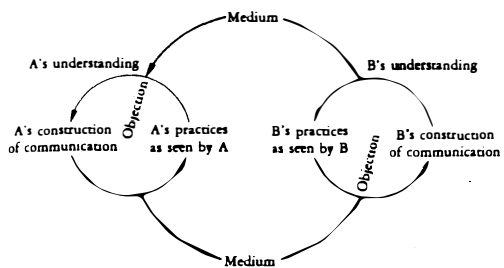


Figure 4.4 An observer's construction of communication between others

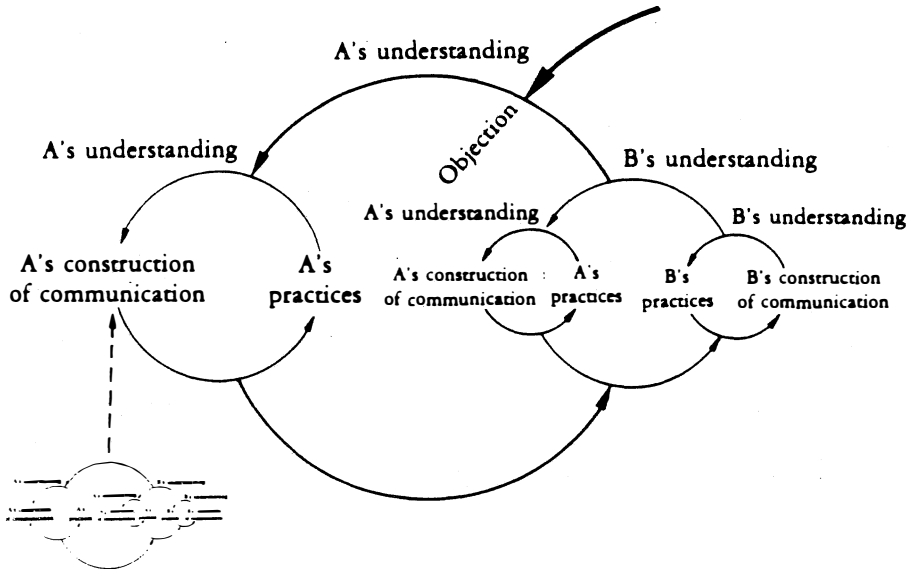


Figure 4.5 A's (minimum) construction of communication