

# LANGUAGE AND THEORIES OF COMMUNICATIONS

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## Abstrak

*Artikel ini mendiskusikan hubungan antara bahasa dan komunikasi. Aspek yang dibicarakan mencakup hal-hal berikut: teori-teori komunikasi, peranan bahasa dalam komunikasi, dan beberapa benang merah yang dapat disimpulkan dari berbagai teori komunikasi tersebut. Dari analisis berbagai teori tersebut ditemukan tiga benang merah (common threads) yaitu bahwa bahasa merupakan alat utama komunikasi, bahwa dalam proses komunikasi selalu akan dijumpai kemungkinan kesalahpahaman, dan bahwa kesepahaman dalam komunikasi itu sifatnya bertingkat.*

(kata kunci: bahasa, komunikasi, kesepahaman)

## 1. Introduction

### *Language and Communication*

It has been commonly recognized that language plays the most role in the practices of human communication. There are many ways of communication but none is more pervasive and more remarkable than human language. By its definition, language has many different definitions. The Dictionary of Indonesian Language (KBBI) defines language as an arbitrary system of sounds used by a group of community for cooperation, interaction, and self-identification, while Crystal (1994) defines language as the systematic, conventional use of sounds signs, or written symbols in human society for communication and self-expression. Morris (1982) defines it as the aspect of human behavior that involves the use of vocal sounds in meaningful patterns and, when they exist, corresponding the written symbols to form, express, and communicate thought and feeling. Furthermore, Gray (2007) defines language as the accumulation of shared-meaning of common ground and as the primary method by which we do things. A number of definitions can also be found in various sources from internet. Amongst the definitions are:

- a systematic means of communicating by the use of sounds or conventional symbols;
- speech: (language) communication by word of mouth;
- terminology: a system of words used to name things in a particular discipline;

- linguistic process: the cognitive processes involved in producing and understanding linguistic communication;
- the mental faculty or power of vocal communication;
- lyric: the text of a popular song or musical-comedy number.  
(<http://communicationnation.blogspot.com/2007/06/what-is-language.html>,  
retrieved December 18, 2007)
- A language is a system, used to communicate, comprised of a set of symbols and a set of rules (or grammar) by which the manipulation of these symbols is governed. These symbols can be combined productively to convey new information, distinguishing languages from other forms of communication.  
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language>, retrieved December 18, 2007)
- The human use of spoken or written words as a communication system. Language can also include a system of communication based on signs, gestures, or inarticulate sounds.  
(<http://www.edgateway.net/pub/docs/pel/glossary.htm>, retrieved December 18, 2007)

There are still many other definitions concerning language, but the above examples are enough facts to show that language definitely has a very crucial role in communication. It is because almost every single definition of language includes the word ‘communication’. **Both language and communication cannot be separated because language is a tool for communication and communication mostly uses language as its main means. Communication is a matter of giving and receiving message by which words play important function. This is because words carry meaning (Lyons, 1996). “Words are the symbols all of us use to share our experience, feelings, and ideas with one and another (Clark et al, 1985. pp.46).” We use words for many things; to think, to listen, to talk, to speak, to read, and to write. Language is so central in communication that without it, we cannot make sense of our intention (Cline, 2007). It is a basic means of conveying information that human beings have. It is therefore important that we should therefore recognize the vital role of language in communications, be it one to one communication, group to group communication, even the whole country’s communication and if we are not able to use proper language in communicating with others, we will of course encounter communication problems.**

According to Ghose (2004) language is the development of the basic form of communication amongst human beings in a society. As the basic form of communication,

it is also the most developed. We cannot fully communicate in any real sense without language.

## 2. Review of Literature

### *General Theory of Communication*

In general, communication can be understood as exchanging of understanding (Wikipedia, 2007). It is the act of transmitting information from one person to another. The basic formula of communication is :

SENDER -----→ MESSAGE -----→ RECIEVER  
( *Simplified model of communication, taken from wikipedia, 2007*)

The above illustration is very simple and from the formula, we can assume that communication is a very simple act and nothing is complex. However, if we take a look at a little deeper insight, there are many questions that can be raised from the formula. Amongst those questions are: 1).will the sender understand that the receiver may not grasp the whole content of the message; second, does the sender realize that the receiver may have feeling problems; and third, do the sender and receiver have the same assumption about the content of the message? And many other questions can still be raised. Communication will work effectively if such questions can be answered (Akmajian et al, 1990).

Messina & Messina (2007) argue that effective communication can result if individuals focus on feeling rather than on content. An effective communicator should understand the content behind the message. According to Messina & Messina, content is the *thing* behind the message. Message is derived from *what is spoken or written* and it is the intention of the speaker. Content is not always explicit in the message nor is it explicit in the utterance or text. Therefore disagreements and arguments frequently are centered around the content of message. Feeling is a physiological aspect of communication. It is there in communication as part of communication processes embedded to the message. It influences the way a message being communicated is understood. Generally speaking, if

we understand one's feelings and we respect his or her feelings, he or she will do the same thing and this can build trust that counts in the process of communication.

Messina & Messina (2007) also argue that communication can fail because of the following pitfalls; parallel listening, jumping to assumption, and competition for the control of thinking. Parallel listening occurs when a listener ignores the feelings of a speaker, concentrating solely on content. This may result in a listener ignoring the feelings behind of the speaker and can lead to the speaker's discouraging impression. Jumping to assumption is when the listener has no serious attention to what is being discussed and therefore the listener ignores the message. Competition for the control of thinking occurs when the speaker and the listener try to influence each other through ideas brought in the communication. Debates or arguments may arise if two communicators try to take control of the communication through their arguments.

### *Message Model of Communication*

Akmajian et al (1990) divide linguistics communication theories into two types; Message Model and Inferential Model. In general, the Message Model can be described as follows:

SPEAKER (encodes message) ----> Sound ---> HEARER (decodes message)

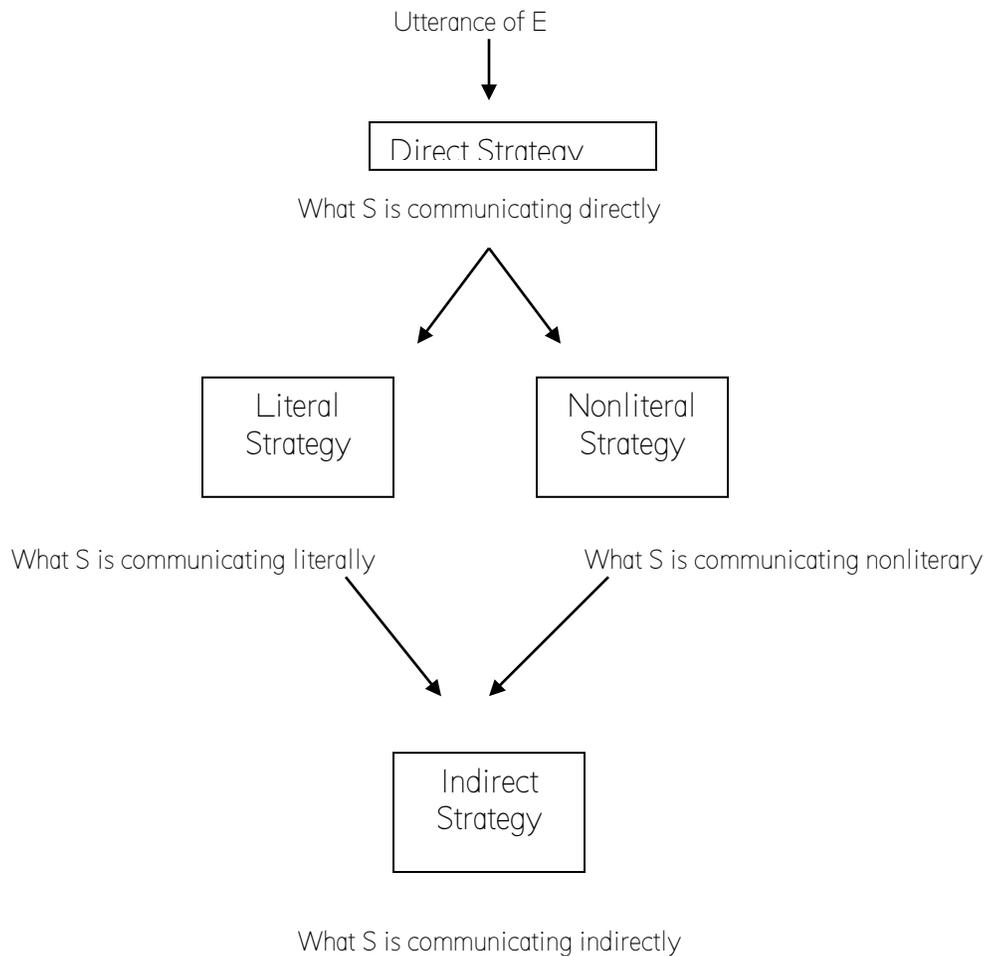
*(Message Model, modified from Akmajian et al, 1990:310)*

In Message Model, the speaker encodes message and the listener decodes message. The speaker has some messages in mind that he/she wants to communicate to hearer. The speaker then produces some expression from the language that encodes the message as its meaning. After hearing the expression, the hearer begins decoding the expression and as he or she does this, at the same time he or she tries to identify the meaning of the expression. This is the way that the communication happens in spoken form. Accordingly, if the communication happens in written forms -*as communication can be either spoken or written*- the writer encodes some expression by producing some pieces of writing (be it a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph or another form), then the reader decodes the message by reading the text. In this case, the writer has some intentions in the text produced and the reader has ways of understanding the text.

Akmajian et al (1990) also acknowledge that this model has a number of problems. First, the model does not account for the possibility that not every single message is always clear to the hearer. Many expressions of language can be ambiguous so that hearer must determine the possible meanings of an expression and this cannot be operated by using this model per se. If this happens, the hearer needs to make efforts in order to understand the meanings of the expression. This can be done by making interpretation on the basis of context, situation, speaker's **background and so forth**. Another problem of Message Model is that message often contains unique or specific information and in order to understand it hearer needs to know what specificity the message is intended. Third problem deals with the possibility of the speaker to have **intention in his expression**. For example, if a person says 'that is the door', it does not always mean that he/she is just showing the door. He/she may have intention to ask the hearer to go out of the room. The fourth problem of this model is the fact that in communication message, hearer may not always use literal expression. He or she may use **nonliteral expression**. For example, when someone says 'Oh you are a good boy', it may mean just the opposite. The fifth problem is the fact that we often say things indirectly. For example, when we say to someone 'the phone is ringing', it may mean that actually we want the hearer to pick up the telephone. This often happens in speech acts, especially illocutionary speech acts. The last problem is that speaker may use words just to mean another communication. This kind of communication involves interaction between the speaker and hearer, and there is an implicature from the interaction as is happening in perlocutionary force.

### *Inferential Model*

This model is complementarily accompanying the Message Model. According to **Akmajian et al (1990)**, if the connection between a speaker's communicative intention-*which is the message*- and a sentence or utterance cannot be understood as what is written, than what is it? There should be something else that makes speaker and hearer understand. This is what Inferential Model is all about. Communication happens because the speaker and the hearer share a system of inferential strategies (Akmajian et al, 1990:315). Inferential Model operates as follows:



*(Inferential Model of Communication : Akmajian et al, 1990:317)*

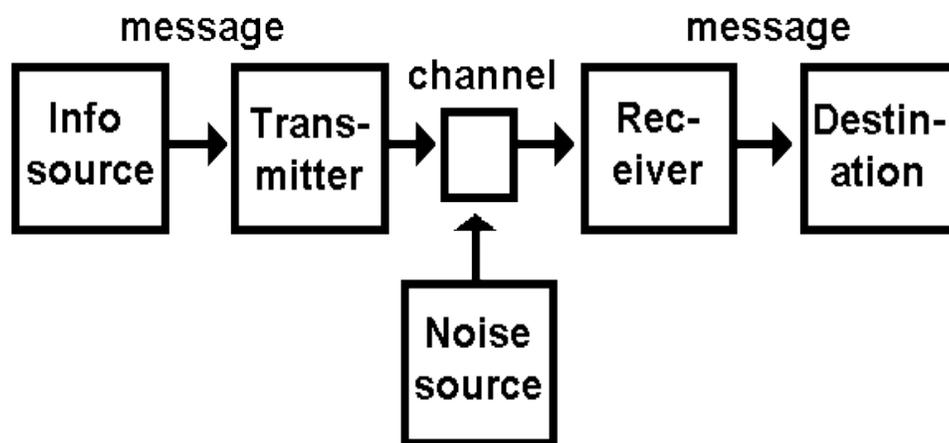
*Note: The system of Inferential Strategies : S = speaker, E = Expression*

This communication model proposes that in communication, we do not only deal with explicit text or utterance but also deal with varieties of shared beliefs or presumptions. If the speaker and hearer share the same presumptions or beliefs, they will find it easy to communicate or at least, inference may be made easily than if otherwise.

The problem of Inferential Model arises from the over use of interpretation. Interpretation is needed in order to understand the message of communication but this should be focused on the text and utterance itself. Although communication will never fully transmit symmetrical message from speaker to hearer, it is important to use the utterance or text maximally.

### *Transmission Model*

Transmission Model, initially called as Mathematical Model, was developed by Claude Shannon, an engineer for the Bell Telephone Company. His goal was to formulate a theory to guide the efforts of engineers in finding the most efficient way of transmitting electrical signals from one location to another. He then collaborated with Weaver to develop a more sophisticated mechanism of communication. Although their model of communication was derived from artificial language, this model also gives contribution and significant influence on the nature of human communication. The formula of his model is as follows:



*(Transmission Model of Communication; simplified from Shannon and Weaver, 1949)*

(Source: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/trans.html> retrieved January 4, 2008)

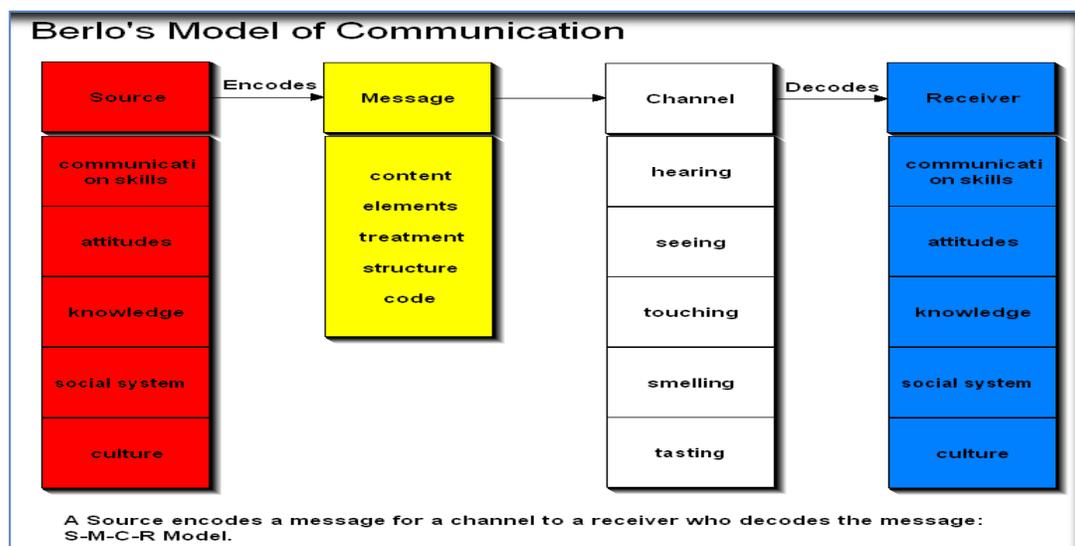
This model has the following basic components of communication; source of information, transmitter, channel, receiver, and destination. As this model is developed from transmission of telephone communication work, the source of information is the caller, the transmission is the machine, the channel is the sound or voice, the receiver is the one who receives the call, and the destination is to whom the message should go. Although this is a model developed for telephone operation, it holds some similarities principles of human being communication.

Chandler (1995) identifies three problems of Transmission Models as technical, semantic, and effectiveness problems. As this model was initially used in telephone

operation, it is mechanistic in nature, while communication is more than just mechanistic operation. Text itself may not give enough information, or it cannot tell more than what is written or spoken. The content of the message may be more than what is said. There is also feeling that should be taken into account in communication. Meaning is also another factor that constitutes a problem. This is because not every single message brings a single interpretation given the fact that one word may have many different meanings. Psychologically, mechanistic communication may have a low level of effectiveness in the sense that the message may not bring about a behavior effect.

### S-M-C-R

S-M-C-R stands for Source – Message- Channel – Receiver. These four elements are the central components of the communication process. The whole idea of this model is as follows:



(S-M-C-R Model of Communication)

(Source: <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/Communication%20Models.htm>, retrieved January 4, 2007)

According to this model of communication, the source (the speaker) and the receiver (the hearer) must take into account five things; communication skills, attitudes, knowledge, social system, and culture. The message consists of content, element, treatment, structure, and code, while the channel uses the commonly understood human five senses (hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting). This model shows the complexity of the communication process in the sense that when communicating, a speaker

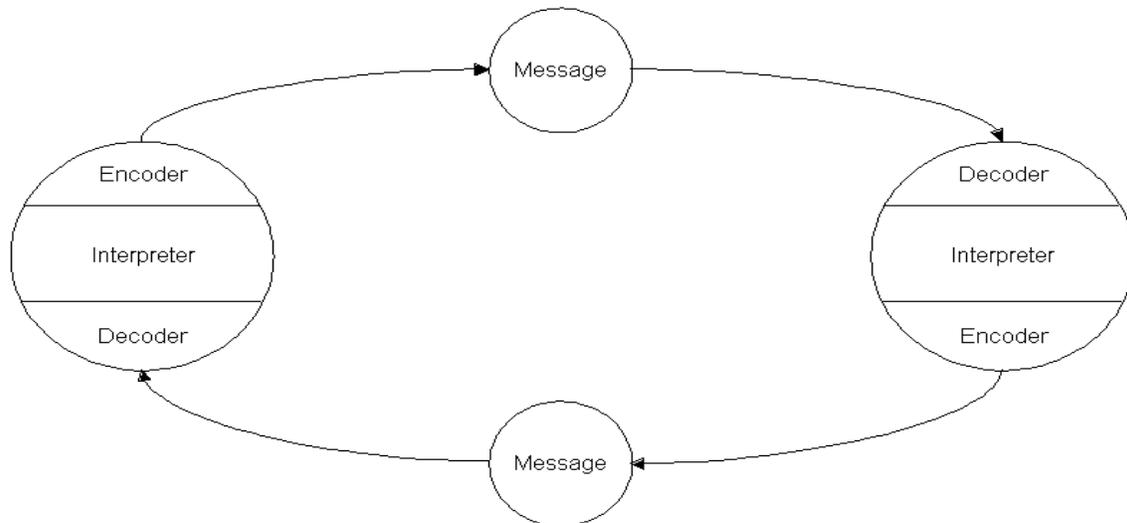
and a hearer need to consider many things. They need to practice in order to be skillful, need to have positive attitude toward communication, must have knowledge of communication, and must understand social system and culture. Lacking partially those aspects will hinder the process of communication.

The possible problem arises from this model is the extent of meaning to be grasped by the receiver. Although the message can be decoded by the hearer, the hearer will possibly have limitation on the understanding of the content of the message. This model does not count the personal interpretation towards message sent.

### *Interactive Model*

Interactive Model was developed by Schramm (1954). This model rejects the idea of Shannon and Weaver (Transmission Model). According to Schramm, decoding and encoding are activities that should be maintained simultaneously by both sender and receiver and that communication is a two-way interchange of messages.

## **Schramm's Model of Communication, 1954**



(Interactive Model of Communication: <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/Communication%20Models.htm>, retrieved January 4, 2007)

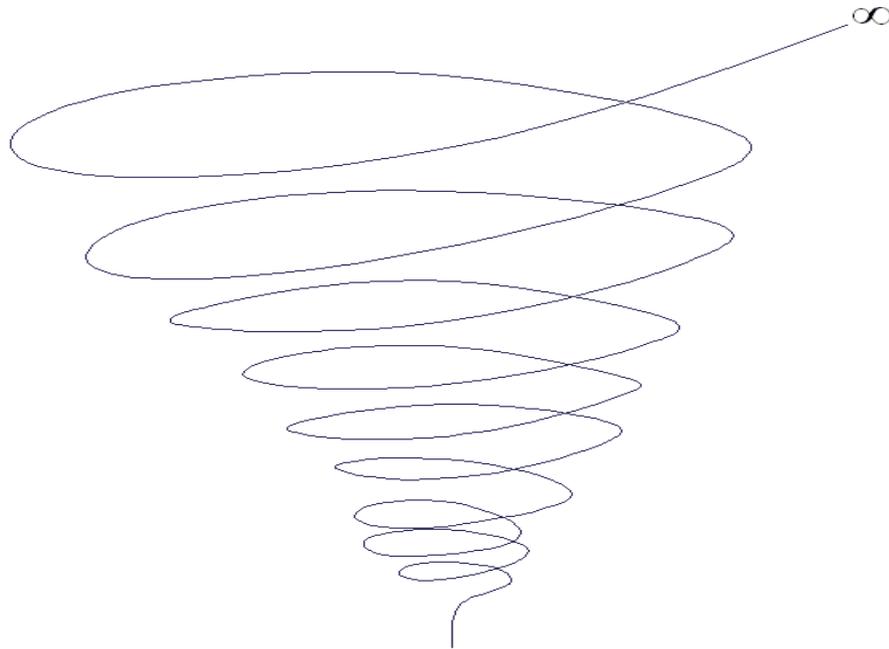
This model also suggests that communication is a reciprocal and repeated action. Both encoder (speaker) and decoder (hearer) have their own interpretation on the message. The encoder has his/her own interpretation of message and so does the decoder.

The problem of this model is that, although this model is not a linear, it still does not account complex communication events such as when the communication happens between more than two parties. Some communication events may be more direct and do not need the reciprocal actions so although this model has positive contribution to communication theories, it still needs to include other ideas.

### *Helical Model*

Helical Model of Communication offers an idea that communication happens gradually from simple to complex and perhaps from concrete to abstract. Communication is affected by human being's experience from past. The process is described as follows:

## **A Helical Model of Communication** from Dance, 1967

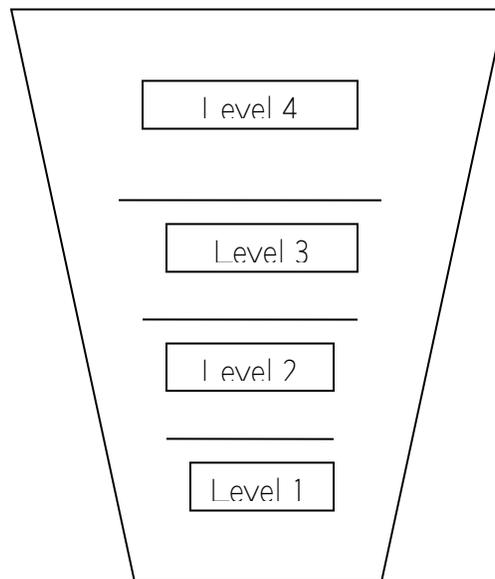


Helical Model of Communication: <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/Communication%20Models.htm> retrieved January 4, 2000)

However, this model also leaves several doubts. For example, a communication does not always happen continuously. The model does not show any period and boundary of communication. In communication, conflicts often occur and therefore we cannot assure that the course of communication is always continuous.

### *Functional Model*

This model was developed by Ruesch and Bateson (1951). They conceived of communication as functioning simultaneously at four levels of hierarchy. Communication process is divided into 4 levels. Level 1 is the basic intrapersonal process. The next level (level 2) is interpersonal and involves speaker and hearer. Level 3 is group interaction that comprises many people and level 4 is for large group involving not only message of speaker but also cultural dimensions. The diagram can be seen as follows:



(Modified from Functional Model of Communication, Ruesch and Bateson, 1951  
(Source: <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/Communication%20Models.htm>,  
retrieved January 4, 2007)

### 3. The Common Threads

Generally speaking, human beings are socially determined by their need to interact with each other. Thus, communication is part of basic need in their daily lives. Social scientists, linguists, and philosophers of both disciplines have different theories and

arguments towards how communication happens and what factors constitute communication. There are a number of philosophical arguments and theories about communication, each of which has its relevant paradigm. In this section, the writer tries to elaborate three principles derived from the theories of communication mentioned above. Accordingly, these three principles are the findings of the research.

First principle is that language is the most important component of communication. This is because in communication, message is the focus of the essence of communication. All theories of communication discuss the importance of speaker, message, and hearer. If we are asked what is spoken and what is heard, the answer is sounds of language. Also, most messages are expressed in language either in written or in spoken forms. It is true that communication may happen where message is passed through other forms such as symbol and gestures. However, such communication is very limited both in its number of occurrences and in its scopes of the message. As Condillac argues that if understanding happens in communication, there should be a means that facilitates the understanding and it is language that functions as the vehicle of understanding (Taylor, 1992).

The second principle of communication is that in communication, speaker and hearer will never share symmetrical information about the message being communicated. Theories of communication acknowledge that to some extent, communication is achieved but its achievement is not always complete in the sense that there is always possibility of misunderstanding. Message Model, for example, acknowledges the possibility of ambiguity in message. Similar things that make communication incomplete are also found in other theories such as *indirectness* in Inferential Model, *abstractness* in Helical Model, *hierarchical levels* in Functional Model, *reciprocity* in Interactive Model, and *communication skills and knowledge* in S-M-C-R Model. This philosophically has been acknowledged by Lockean skepticism proponents arguing that there will be no symmetrical understanding between speaker and hearer towards the perception on any symbol used in communication (Taylor, 1992). We may have the same understanding about what a computer is, but we will never have the same perception about it.

Third, there is a degree of communication understanding amongst communicants. This is due to the differences in communication skills and in their engagement of shared-

beliefs and cultures amongst communicants (as shown in S-M-C-R Model). The degree of communication understanding can also be seen from the *abstractness* of Helical Model, *hierarchical levels* of **Functional Model**, and *'interpretiveness'* in **Interactive Model**. This is in line with **Lock's** *Free Individual Concept*, **Derrida's** *Deconstruction Argument*, **Fish's** *Interpretive Idea*, and **Persons'** *Voluntaristic of Social Action* (Taylor, 1992). According to Persons, language and culture are socially determined. It is therefore, our understanding about others, depends on how much knowledge we have to understand the message being communicated and how good we are at interpreting message. For example, if we talk about language, we have a common sense of what language is – *that is a tool of communication*. This idea can be understood by most normal people, and perhaps all, since they use language as a tool of communication. However, if we talk about language as a science, not all people understand the idea. Language as a science is mainly the concern of linguists and not of common people. Within linguists, if we talk about segments of language such as morphology, not all linguists have the same knowledge about morphology. They may major on specific aspects of morphology.

#### 4. Conclusion

Different theory of communication may have different characteristics, **components, and purposes**. However, there are some **'common threads'** that all theories have. These common threads are: first, all theories acknowledge the importance of language in communication; second, misunderstanding is a very potential problem of communication; and third, the degree of communication understanding varies amongst communicants depending on their language competence, communication skills, cultural engagement, as well as interpretive analysis.

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