

2010

Imperfect Expression

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Imperfect Expression

Courtney J. Sutter

A creative exploration of
miscommunication
in our daily lives

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Introduction

On an overcast Friday morning, I arrived at a bus stop across from St. Paul's Cathedral in Oakland and began to admire the church's ornate swirl of carvings. A few seconds later, a man approached me.

"Did the 500 go by here?," he asked.

"I don't know," I told him, pulled out of my trance and mildly startled. "I just arrived and really haven't been paying that much attention." (I didn't think I should mention that I was distracted by attractive architecture).

Before I had even finished replying, the man gave me an annoyed look and said, "No, I mean does it go by here? Does it run here?"

I quickly apologized for mishearing him and assured him that, yes, it does. Then, when I thought for a second about what he had *actually* said in the first place. Instead of saying "Did the 500 go by here?" as I initially interpreted, he had really said, "Do the 500 go by here?," using the first or second person form of the verb "to do" that would not fit in this sentence in standard English grammar. I must have *really* not been paying attention.

The method we were using to communicate –the English language –had momentarily failed us. This man and I experienced a linguistic blip and we had to figure out how to fix it. He might have realized that his use of a non-standard form of "to do" caught me off-guard and adroitly adjusted his grammar and repeated his question in two different forms to make sure that I really understood his question the second time

around. Of course, I could have helped the situation by being a bit more alert, but then, hindsight is always 20/20.

Miscommunication stories, such as the one already relayed above, although seemingly mundane, are fraught with frustration, embarrassment, anxiety, and/or silliness for all the people involved. Case in point, I was embarrassed that I misheard this man and can imagine that he was frustrated that he had to repeat his seemingly simple question.

Our system of communication –language –is not perfect. Rather, it allows plenty of room for its users to misunderstand, mistaken, and misinterpret others. Language is not as finite as people tend to think –when we begin to consider the endless variation among people, cultures, and within languages themselves, it becomes increasingly easy to see how miscommunications can so easily arise.

Communication errors and slip-ups cost governments, businesses, and regular people big bucks, not to mention precious lives. After Hurricane Katrina, for example, auditors concluded that the United States paid an additional \$7.8 million on portable classrooms for areas affected by the storm when they missed deadlines to negotiate for a lower price. The auditors cited, along with fraud and poor planning, miscommunication as one of the three contributors to this waste of money.

Similarly, in 2009, a 25 year old Norwegian man, seeking treatment at a hospital in Denmark, lost his life to a brain hemorrhage after trying to explain to hospital staff that he was a hemophiliac. The doctors and nurses thought he was saying he was a

homosexual since the two words in Danish are so similar –*haemofili* vs. *homofil*– a seemingly small, though ultimately tragic, difference in phonemes and syllables.

Although the examples you’ll find in this collection are not quite as extreme, these cases help emphasize the salience of miscommunication in our daily lives. The nine glimpses in this collection have been taken from interviews with people connected to Carnegie Mellon University and serve, I hope, to demonstrate the wide net cast by the concept of “miscommunication,” as well as peoples’ various methods for handling situations in which they encounter some difficulty.

I suppose we’ve just all learned to live with and ignore these small linguistic inconveniences. Miscommunications seem to be like sneezes –a typically unexciting part of life that people may or may not acknowledge with a “bless you” or a “gusundheit.” But, like sneezes carrying germs, miscommunications unfortunately have the side effect of potentially transmitting discord.

Methods

This is a collection of miscommunication experiences. I gathered the stories of members of the Carnegie Mellon community, and have retold them here in an exercise in creative nonfiction as well as a survey of narrative, rhetorical, and linguistic concepts. The goal was to blend each of my majors –linguistics and professional writing –to create a text that is accessible to a general audience, yet sprinkled with information that might pique a reader’s interest in language and communication.

Through my research as an undergraduate and for this thesis in particular, I’ve learned quite a bit about the study of narrative and the differences between oral and written discourse. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, for instance, defined narrative as any sequence of clauses that contains a temporal juncture, or shift in time. They also defined four stages that are present in all narratives: orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution.

Regarding the differences between spoken and written discourse, Deborah Tannen argues that speaking is a more context-bound activity than writing, and speaking allows for cohesion through non-verbal channels while cohesion in writing must be established through creating complex syntactic structures.

What does this mean for creating written texts out of purely spoken ones, and even vice versa? Writers do this all the time –writing speeches, paraphrasing, and transcribing stories are all common practices. What one must do to recreate a narrative, however, is strike a balance between the traits of oral language versus those of written language. This is what I have attempted here.

The following nine stories are my retellings of stories various members of the Carnegie Mellon University community have told me during my pursuit of linguistic confusion. What I found, however, is that individual interpretations of “miscommunication” vary greatly from person to person. When a person initially thinks of a miscommunication, the first thing they think of is not necessarily a purely linguistic problem, such as an ambiguous pronoun or misplaced modifier. As I was collecting these stories, this is something that surprised me –probably because I have spent a considerable amount of time during my undergraduate career focusing on trying to eliminate linguistic confusion in my own writing and speaking.

This collection does contain some examples of miscommunication on a purely linguistic level, but also includes miscommunication brought about through intentional rhetorical strategies and unintentional communication difficulties due to particular characteristics of certain situations.

Thank you, and I hope you enjoy the following stories.

Intentional Miscommunication

Miscommunications, often, are one-sided. While one interlocutor might be completely baffled by an interaction, the other is fully in control of their actions and using them to his or her advantage. Following the rhetorical tradition of strategic language-use, the interlocutor in control has the power to use ambiguity, vagueness, and silence to his or her advantage. Such benign manipulation contributed to some frustration for the protagonists of the following two stories.

A Brief Lesson in Citation

"All fields of research agree on the need to document scholarly borrowings, but documentation conventions vary because of the different needs of scholarly disciplines."

-Modern Language Association Website

"You *must* use MLA format!" Maria Zabat shouts jokingly, practicing her impersonation of a disgruntled English teacher. At the middle school and high school level, many American students are introduced to the scary world of research papers by the guiding light of the Modern Language Association's format guidelines for parenthetical citations and bibliographies. And for many, MLA becomes a way of life.

As a freshly graduated English student and aspiring lawyer with a creative flair, Maria may not always *like* to adhere to the MLA rules, but she appreciates and understands their purpose, which is to help bring about clarity and uniformity to one's writing.

"I try to be as clear as possible and keep things short for people," she says. "I learned that from Carnegie Mellon!"

She learned another lesson about clarity and simplicity in a final project—a group project: anathema to characteristically lone-wolf English majors everywhere. The four

members of her group were each responsible for writing 25 pages of their 100 page report and two of them, Maria and another girl, volunteered to compile the parts and streamline the paper.

But this wasn't an ordinary streamlining process. "This one person in my group was just not understanding how to cite properly," she says, clearly still exasperated by this person's alleged ineptitude.

When she received the part written by the inept one, he had used a mysterious citation technique. While Maria and the two others had faithfully adhered to MLA, this student's method "was not any method I've ever seen like in my four years as an English major," Maria says. "It was just weird; it was just not a proper way to cite things."

But this wasn't a simple case of Maria being picky –her two other group mates seemed to be as exasperated by the citation situation as her. "Oh, they were annoyed," she laughs.

They decided to give him the benefit of the doubt since the group had not really discussed how they would cite their sources. Maria would just ask him to change his citations –simple as that.

"I was trying to tell him 'Well, the three of us have used MLA -three versus one.'" But, Maria says, he was unresponsive. She called him. She emailed him. But he wouldn't respond. When she finally *did* get hold of him, they arranged to meet half an hour before class to go over how to use MLA citations and fix his portion together. Maria saw it as a great opportunity for a learning/teaching experience. "I wanted to *explain* to him how to cite and then he didn't come until like fifteen minutes before class."

Perhaps this attempted lesson in MLA citations was well-meant, but not well-received and the rogue member put up a fight. Maria believes that his attitude was along the lines of, “Well, I completed my part. I’m done. I don’t want to have anything to do with this anymore,” –an attitude of good-riddance.

That makes sense –we’ve probably all been there, at the end of the semester, with endless projects and papers due. It’s easy to see why a person would be reluctant to change his citation style –especially if MLA really *was* foreign to him. Her partner was just strategically using silence and unresponsiveness to ignore what he didn’t want to deal with.

“But,” she ponders, “I don’t know if that’s really like miscommunication, or if it was this guy just being a dick.”

She laughs, her aggravation fleeting.

The Most Egregious Agreement

When I get ready to talk to people, I spend two-thirds of the time thinking about what they want to hear and one-third thinking about what I want to say.

-Abraham Lincoln

Rows of cloth-draped tables, decked with glossy pamphlets, transforming the room into a dizzying labyrinth. Each table manned by an eager person offering an eager smile and mountains of literature about the program they represent.

This is a study abroad fair, where university students flock to learn about studying archeology in Athens, business in Beijing, and criminology in Cape Town.

Hemma, a senior electrical and computer engineering student, is sitting across from me at the Maggie Murph café, cradled by her sunshine-yellow winter coat, her laptop open and presumably ready for action. She tells me that she wanted to study abroad (in Switzerland specifically) and went to one such study abroad fair and remembers encountering a somewhat frustrating communication mishap. Although she

is originally from Mumbai, India and therefore in effect *already* studying abroad, she didn't want to limit her cross-cultural experiences to attending Steelers' rallies, seeing a Starbucks on every corner, and trying to interpret what the bus drivers mean when they say, "Are ya gonna redd up that mess ya made?"

Hemma approached a table with information about a summer electrical engineering program at École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) in Switzerland. Standing behind the table were Swiss students who attend EPFL. Having been to my share of study abroad fairs, I can just imagine their excitement (maybe real, maybe just an act) as they eagerly gushed introductions and pushed brochures spattered with glossy mountain vistas and cobblestone street-scenes into Hemma's hands.

"They were a bit pushy, but that's only because they didn't want people to miss out on the experiences they had out there [in Switzerland]," she says with understanding.

But, like any conscientious prospective student, Hemma had a few questions to ask before she signed on the dotted line.

"I was asking about how people are placed into dorms when they're from the US. So, I was asking specific questions about how the dorms are, and they thought I was trying to get the dorms there to be like the dorms here, whereas I was trying to say the dorms here are like this, how is it like there? I thought the person was on the same page and they were not –they thought completely different and [our discussion] in fact, backfired. "I think it was just kind of dumb."

I asked Hemma what the EPFL students would say if I were to, for example, ask if there are bunk beds in the dorms.

“Right, yeah there are bunk beds, blah blah,” she responded. “Like, you know, they would *add* to it as opposed to...starting from scratch. They would just agree with you regardless,” she said.

I imagined the conversation that transpired:

Hemma: “Wait, so I have a few questions about the living arrangements. Do students usually have singles, or one roommate, or multiple roommates?”

EPFL Guy: “Yes.”

Hemma: “So, which is it? What’s the most common roommate arrangement?”

EPFL Guy: “We have many students living in singles, with one other person, and with a few people.”

Hemma: “Ok, so, what about the beds? For instance, are they like bunk beds?”

EPFL Guy: “Yes, you’ll be sleeping in a bunk bed.”

Hemma: “Well, are they just bunk beds?”

EPFL Guy: “Yes, most rooms have bunk beds.”

Hemma: “So, then, does that mean most rooms have multiple people living in them?”

EPFL Guy: “Yes, most rooms have more than one person.”

Hemma: “But, you said before that there are a lot of single rooms as well.”

EPFL Guy: “Yes, there are lots of single rooms –plenty of them, actually, since many students want to have peace and quiet while they study. Do you have any more questions about housing?”

Hemma: “Um, no, that’s alright.”

EPFL Guy: “Great then. Now, about courses –”

Back in Maggie Murph, without batting an eyelash, Hemma told me that she realized that the EPFL reps were blindly accommodating whatever she said when she overheard them talking to another prospective student. “They said, in fact, close to the *opposite view.*”

EPFL Guy: “Here is where you will be staying.”

Other student: “How many students generally live in a room? Because, I would really prefer to not live alone.”

EPFL Guy: “Oh, most rooms are designed to house at least four students; some are even larger, so you most certainly will not be living alone. In fact, our facilities don’t have very many singles at all since most students want to make new friends and living arrangements like this help that process along.”

Hemma (tacit): “What? So they’re just trying to appease me?” Each question of hers must have prompted an ingrained make-the-potential-customer-feel-comfortable technique. Cold, hard facts had nothing to do with it.

With her suspicions confirmed, Hemma was not mad. Nor was she disconcerted. “I realized that they were just trying to, you know, make me feel at home.” She was,

however a bit disappointed –“They didn’t have to try so hard to make me feel at home; they resorted to advertising Switzerland,” which they shouldn’t have had to do.

Regardless, their sycophantic advertising strategy must have worked –Hemma took her new pen, the EPFL logo staring brightly back at her, and wrote out her email address on the dotted line.

Attempts to Avoid Miscommunication

Of course, rhetorical strategies aren't reserved for the antagonists –the following two protagonists used some of their favorite rhetorical weapons to attempt to extract a certain response from their interlocutors while unintentionally taking heed to I.A. Richard's belief that "Rhetoric [...] should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies."

The Great Elicitor

Don't be discouraged. It's often the last key in the bunch that opens the lock.

-Author Unknown

Clear and consistent. Clear and consistent. I can almost hear this mantra repeated conscientiously in Lena Ortiz's mind. Although we're comfortable with each other, as we chat, I can see her carefully choosing words—one of her many self-described perfectionist tendencies—ensuring that she evokes the exact sentiment she had intended.

We're sitting in her brightly decorated, photograph-specked office—the faces of countless smiling people eaves-dropping from within their frames. She also has a number of colorful prints of paintings by Latin American artists—a tribute to her Puerto Rican heritage. I'm asking her about how she avoids communication mishaps in her life, both in and outside of work.

"I also really try and be very much in-tune to either the audience or the person that I'm speaking to," she elaborates, echoing the wisdom of Aristotle and modern rhetoricians who emphasize the importance of keeping one's audience in mind at all times when speaking.

So, there's another one to add to her arsenal –tuned-in. Clear and consistent and tuned in. She's focusing on being self-aware while simultaneously intuitively reading other people. "I guess that's a strength and strategy that I developed in this job."

Lena works in an office at Carnegie Mellon University called CMARC that advises students in transition –such as students who entered the university's School of Computer Science, but ultimately decided that their passion lies in bassoon performance and must transfer to the School of Music. When CMARC was first created over 40 years ago, its original goal was to be a resource center for minority students at the university. That goal has since morphed to encompass both minority students and students in transition.

According to Lena, this dual role can lead to some confusion, but she usually tries to address such issues and diffuse any confusion from the get-go.

"Sometimes [students] come in and they're like 'is this *solely* for minority students?' and I can sense that they are having questions and are looking around, but I will try and immediately address it and just be like 'have you heard of what we do?' and I just put it out there." Nipping miscommunications and misunderstandings in the bud. Excellent.

For Lena, miscommunication arises from a *lack* of communication, whether among family, friends, or the students she advises.

If she's having an interpersonal problem within her family, Lena explains that she "usually will be the one to speak up and [...] say like 'if you're upset with me or you're upset about a certain thing then let's talk about it.'" Lena easily transfers this upfront

open communication to her workplace, where, when faced with a reticent student her usual methods involve asking question after question.

“I usually keep probing, to be honest,” she says, saying that if she feels that the conversation isn’t effective and she senses that the student is uncomfortable with the environment, she will try to ask questions and find a topic to make him or her feel more at home.

“So tell me about *before* you got here.”

“Tell me about your family. Do you keep in touch with them?”

“Do you feel homesick? Do you like the [campus] environment?”

These communication strategies are Lena’s ammunition as she strives to assist the students she sees to succeed in college. Usually, she’ll hit a sweet spot early in the conversation, and the dialog will start flowing.

But, of course, there are tougher cases than others, and a very important balance to strike between probing and pushing.

Lena remembers one student in particular –a transfer to the Tepper School of Business –who tested her strategies to within an inch of their lives.

“He had been very responsive to email,” Lena recalled. “But when he came in, he was extremely extremely quiet and shy and very reserved.” Realizing that these might just be defining characteristics of this student’s personality, Lena wasn’t initially concerned. But as she continued to receive clipped answers to her questions – fine, good, I don’t know, maybe, ok –her concern and frustration grew.

“But I *knew* that we weren’t getting to the [...] meaty type of stuff that I needed to have as a counselor and as an advisor [...] so I just kept probing and asking questions.”

Lena was approaching that dangerous barrier – “you don’t want to push so that the person never comes *back*” –she emphasized.

But this was now or never –the nature of her job only allows her a few short visits with students throughout the course of their academic career, so Lena absolutely felt that she needed to make a connection with this student. The standard “how are you liking school?” and “are you struggling with your assignments?” would just not cut it for him. It was time to get personal.

“I see that you have a Spanish last name. Is your family Latin American?”

With that question, Lena reports that this student lit up and started chatting freely about his family (who were of Mexican descent, living in New York City) and their culture.

After a few minutes of comparing silly family stories, the lighthearted conversation turned serious.

“So yeah,” he began. “Are there students who really just don’t like being here?”

“Yeah there *are*,” Lena said, a ray of reassurance for the student. “A lot of those students are from New York because [Pittsburgh] is very different from New York.”

“And then,” Lena tells me, “he just disclosed everything. You can’t always necessarily accept the yes and no because a lot of times there’s more there –you have to *judge*.”

Laughing in Braddock

"A joke is a very serious thing."

-Winston Churchill

Sitting across the worn wooden table from me, one foot perched on the edge of her chair, wavy red hair wrapping her in warmth on a chilly autumn evening, was Claire. She holds a glass jar filled with water –it was formerly a jar of salad dressing, she tells me.

We're discussing communication strategies and I ask her about how she usually tries to get others to understand her.

"[I'd] probably start out by trying to find something in common [with another person]," she says. It's a way to figure out how to relate to the other person "sense-of-humor-wise," she explains. "Like talking about standup the other person might have seen, or something like that."

"Can you think of a time where this strategy didn't work?" I ask innocently.

"Oh *sure!*" Claire says immediately. "I guess [it happens] too many times when you try to pull in references that are, say, from television shows or something like that. Even trying it twice and it failing," she laughs. "It's kind of an uncomfortable situation."

* * *

Claire's photography class, loftily entitled "Modern Ruin," was taking a field trip to the Braddock neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA to experience some modern ruin first-hand. Braddock, historically, was a fast-paced steal-making Mecca, attracting immigrants from all the nooks and crannies of Europe during the nineteenth century. Today, the city is struggling to hold on to every one of its 2,912 residents.

"It's kind of a crappy neighborhood," Claire adds, trailing off.

Unlike a regular school trip, a la the third grade's annual trip to the aquarium, this was a low-maintenance college trip across the river. People not even taking the class were welcome to tag along. Perhaps they felt a lack of urban ruin in their structured university lives.

Claire was sitting with a girl in her class and that girl's boyfriend during a down moment of their excursion into the fading town. They had just left a nearby convenience store where they had received a free half-gallon of iced tea, a gift from the store's owner after he grilled them about their purpose for wandering around his town. Presumably, they passed his test.

According to Claire, their day had been full –they had already been followed by a benign pit bull –it didn't growl at them or anything, but stayed close behind for a while, emitting aggression. They decided it was best to not make eye-contact. They had also already survived the harrowing experience of exploring many of the abandoned buildings Braddock has to offer. These building, often gutted by fire, where rusty nails

and hissing cats posed constant threats, were their subjects –the modern ruin they were trying to capture on film.

“One girl [in my class]–the one who’s boyfriend was there –she *prided* herself on exploring abandoned houses,” Claire remembers. “Which is really stupid.”

Thinking back, Claire isn’t sure why this girl’s boyfriend was accompanying them –“I assumed she brought him to feel safe in the neighborhood and help out with navigating some of the homes.” It actually made a lot of sense –“Some homes had rotted-out stairwells and signs of people sleeping on the floors, so the more people in a group, the better.”

Setting their cameras down and shifting their focus away from their ruined urban surroundings, the classmates and boyfriend tried to engage in conversation. Not being familiar with the boyfriend (or even the girl in her class, for that matter) Claire, relying on her go-to strategy for new social situations, turned the conversation to comedy. Maybe they could find more common ground through some chuckles and return back to campus with more than just photos of decay.

“Hey, so have you guys seen any Dave Chappelle?” she asked, beginning to test her audience.

“Oh yeah, a little,” the girl nodded, apparently disinterested.

“Yeah! I love Chappelle!” the boyfriend replied.

While the girl stared ahead blankly, Claire and the boyfriend started a conversation about the comedian and the Washington D.C. area’s standup comedy scene.

“Well, have you heard his joke about the homeless man masturbating on a train? Or maybe it was a bus.” Claire began, somewhat incredulously –kind of a risqué topic for a first-time encounter, but, if this guy likes Dave Chappelle, he can probably handle it. If not, what would be the worst that could happen? A few awkward moments of embarrassment? She’d probably never see these people again after the end of the semester anyway.

“No,” the boyfriend hesitated. “Maybe if you remind me, something’ll sound familiar.”

“Well, it starts out with Dave Chappelle smoking on a bus and people were giving him looks and saying things like, ‘Sir, this is everybody’s air, sir!’” Claire recounted the joke.

“Yeah!” the boyfriend said. “Yeah, and the same people didn’t say anything to the guy jerking off!”

“Biological attack!”

They laughed and Claire breathed a sigh of relief –humor well-received: a connection had been forged –with at least one person.

His girlfriend continued staring blankly –clearly, she didn’t get it, didn’t care, or worse, was judging them, Claire thought with slight dismay and a twinge of that awkwardness. “The miscommunication happened because she didn’t get the joke –she didn’t get why it was funny,” Claire decided in retrospect.

But not to be discouraged, Claire pitched another joke (with different subject matter and a slightly different comedic color) hoping to gain some ground with the girl. Again, nothing.

“But,” she says optimistically, “we –her boyfriend and I –bonded because he understood the humor. Although the girl didn’t understand, I was feeling good about relating to [someone] about irreverent humor.”

Out of Our Control

What happens when something not directly related to language-use takes the upper-hand in an interaction between people? Often, something completely outside one's control –such as technology, addiction, or a (supposed) medical disorder –can contribute to feelings of frustration and helplessness, as the following three stories can attest to.

A Filmmaker's Folly

*"Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind."
-Rudyard Kipling*

"It's *such* a boring story," Chris Harper laughs, jollily protesting my prods to elicit a story –any story – about a personal experience with miscommunication. But I'm resolute.

"No. I want to hear it."

"It's not even a story." The protests continue.

"That's ok," I say. We'll let Labov and Waletzky¹ be the judges of that, I think to myself.

Chris, a thirty-year old bushy-bearded filmmaker who masquerades as a bookseller, reluctantly ventures nearer to a story.

"I'm just trying to wrack my brain for something more interesting than showing somebody how to take a light-meter reading or something like that," he chuckles nervously.

"That would work. Go for it," I encourage.

Reluctantly, but with acute expertise, Chris explains that a light meter is an instrument that videographers and cinematographers use to measure the amount of

¹ William Labov and Jacob Waletzky -sociolinguists who studied theories of narrative and story-telling extensively in the early-mid 20th century.

light –in lumens –each subject of any particular shot is giving off. Too much light – overexposure. Too little light –underexposure. With successful use of the light meter, neither scenario is likely.

A graduate of Pittsburgh Filmmakers School of Film, Photograph and Digital Media, Chris usually takes on the role of director or cinematographer of independent film projects around the Pittsburgh area. The nature of such projects, Chris explains matter-of-factly, means that the filmmaker (him) is not working with a lot of money. That means, unless he had the capability (or desire) to clone himself into a whole film crew, anybody working on the project would have to be a volunteer. “So,” he explains, “most of the people who are helping you don’t know how to do anything on the technical end of filmmaking.”

According to Chris, he hasn’t experienced any major miscommunications due to incorrect reading/measuring/use of the light meter because “it’s so expensive [to make a film] that I was so paranoid about that sort of thing I always made sure the camera was loaded properly [...] and that the light meter reading was correct.”

Just as our discussion of potential equipment failures dimmed, a spark of recollection crosses Chris’s face.

“Yeah, um, just talking about this, it’s all coming back to me now. I was shooting my final project.”

Hear we go, I thought. Story time.

“I never had to take out a loan –I always worked and saved up and didn’t spend money on anything. I lived at home ‘til I was like 24 just to get through this without

having to put myself in tens of thousands of dollars in debt. So there was a lot riding on this final project.”

Chris gathered an entourage of people he trusted to volunteer as his crew one night—his younger brother, his brother’s girlfriend, and their close friend, David. They all worked together and shared the same schedule, so they would just swing by after their shift. It was a no-brainer for them. Chris had already set everything up —dressing the scene just the way he wanted it, setting up the lights and the camera. To the untrained eye, probably all he was missing was the action.

He was familiar with his crew’s habits, so, Chris says, “I was fully expecting them to be about thirty minutes to an hour late.” He used the extra time to perfect his scene. He adjusted, he re-adjusted, he un-adjusted.

For five hours.

“It might have been more like four,” he says now, laughing. “But it was still very late.”

Looking back, Chris realizes that his volunteer crew’s collective drug-addiction probably didn’t help the situation. “I probably should have known better than to rely on them because they were pretty heavy into the drug scene —I guess I was being a little naïve.”

“It was like a total bullshit excuse,” Chris says, growing increasingly exasperated as the memories flood back. He says he called his brother’s cell phone numerous times asking where he was —and each time his brother assured Chris that he was on his way. By the third or fourth call like this, Chris had a breakdown over the phone.

“Yeah like freaking the fuck out,” asking where they were, why they weren’t where they were supposed to be, how long they’d be.

“He said it was a *book* club –like people that he worked with were having a book discussion that night or something. It was just an excuse for a bunch of polyamorous addicts to flirt at a dive slash drug bar. It was bullshit.”

To add insult to injury, when the three of them finally showed up to help, they didn’t even think they were late. “They were just talking to me like everything was fine, but I could tell they were as high as hell by their body language and tangents.”

In the end, everything cleared up, and the anger and mistrust dissipated into the foggy past. Chris’s final project was well-received and he graduated. After a serious wake-up call involving a robbery and drive-by shooting, Chris’s brother has kicked his drug addiction and has been a “reliable collaborator” ever since. “This whole breakdown,” Chris ponders in retrospect, “revolves around the one-track minds of addicts and their complete disregard for accountability, respect, and their concept of time –and my naïveté.”

An Emoticon is Not a Suitable Substitute :-{

"It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity."

-Albert Einstein

In this miscommunication-driven journey, I decided to take a side-trip from people that I was already familiar with and perform a small act of guerrilla interviewing. So, one afternoon in November, I found an unsuspecting student sitting in the library's café. His computer was open, but he seemed to be working on some kind of math assignment out of his notebook.

"Hi," I said trying to project an air of scholarly confidence while being secretly nervous. "I'm working on my senior thesis –would you be interested in doing a short interview about miscommunication?"

He seemed startled, his eyes widened. But what would you expect if a stranger with a spiffy voice recorder and notebook interrupted your homework time?

His name was Alex and he was a nineteen-year-old electrical and computer engineering student –we had never seen each other before then and have not seen each other since. But nonetheless, we had a nice chat about how he deals with the communication issues that swirl through his life.

“I usually use illustrations,” he says of his preferred method of explanation. “Yeah, I try to draw pictures.” His intuition is solid -numerous studies have shown that visual aids can greatly increase a person’s understanding pretty much anything, from algebra to algorithms.

Alex quickly recalled a recent incident in which he was trying to explain something “technical” to his friend about their homework. Picture-drawing works well with “technical,” right? We all remember those useful circuit diagrams from our 10th grade physics textbooks. The catch, however, was that they were communicating via instant messenger. Like, on the internet.

Alex lamented that his friend was just not getting this technical concept –the limited features of the instant messenger program were not allowing for good old-fashioned picture-drawing. Neither one had access to a scanner nor the time to find one before their assignment was due. To add another layer of complexity to the situation, they were not speaking face-to-face and thereby possibly much less “involved” in the conversation in the sense that they were not able to gauge each other’s tone of voice, body gestures, etc. Emoticons, common in online discussions, could definitely have helped, but unless an emoticon exists that depicts a complex circuit diagram, I’m guessing the smilies and confused faces only got Alex and his friend so far.

“If I don’t have a way in which I can illustrate it, it becomes really difficult [...] to communicate a concept.” Alex believes that, along with visuals, face-to-face communication is the best way to mitigate the potential for miscommunication. He

believes that the internet, usually reputed to be one of mankind's greatest technological developments, is the root of all ev— I mean, the root of all communication issues.

Ok, maybe not *all* of them, but Alex, in his own experience, feels that online, rather than on The Cut, is “usually where [communication] breaks down.”

Alex's observation puts a thoroughly modern spin on a problem that, I suspect, has plagued humanity since communicating first became gained popularity: technology gives miscommunication yet another arena to confuse the masses, decrease productivity, and generally drive people insane.

On Clueless Bunnies

"No one would talk much in society if they knew how often they misunderstood others."

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

"I had assumed that because he was in an advanced history class that he could read social cues," Evelyn Andersen said, her voice stretched thin with urgent exasperation. "Which is not true –he is a clue-free bunny," she adds in a cheery staccato.

A student/writer/social-media consultant, Evelyn took a deep breath and exhaled loudly as we talked in the basement of the library about a run-in she had had with an alleged socially-deficient student.

"I'm pretty sure he had Asperger's, but not the *graceful* kind where he makes up for it with high intelligence," she pondered. Her brother had Asperger's, a disorder which falls along the autism spectrum of disorders, and could definitely mask it with brilliance. Not this guy, though. "He just doesn't understand when people talk, which is obnoxious."

Although she usually tries to tell stories and use analogies to get points across, Earlier, Evelyn told me that her primary method for ensuring that effective

communication takes place is to use analogies and to tell stories as to illustrate examples. Unfortunately, “where it [doesn’t] work to tell stories is when I’m talking to Asperger’s students.” One of the communication strategies she’s developed is to be extremely explicit with people she identifies as exhibiting traits commonly associated with Asperger’s. Whether or not the person in question actually *has* the disorder is open for debate.

Evelyn gave me a breakdown of how she typically identifies someone as a potential Asperger’s student. “I usually start treating someone as if he has Asperger’s if:

- talks intensely about an esoteric subject (board-game rules or subspecies of Pokémon)
- ignores my non-verbal cues that I do not want to talk with him (like folded arms, body angled away, disapproving tone in my voice, [and] interrupting to change the subject)
- or sometimes if he exhibits particular body language (like standing too close to me or repetitively touching something)”
- Studies things like engineering or computer science.

This particular Asperger’s encounter occurred when Evelyn and the other student were preparing a joint presentation on the Salem Witch Trials and soon became engulfed in an intense conversation about religion. According to Evelyn, her partner “began lecturing [her] on Christian dogma.” She didn’t find this lecture necessary, seeing as she had grown up surrounded by “the smells and bells of a high Episcopalian church.” So, she thought she’d do what comes naturally to her and tell a story about it, ultimately

hoping that her point –that “I’m competent stop asking me questions and let me do what I want” –would come across loud and clear.

And perhaps it would have, but her presentation partner didn’t seem to be getting it and continued, unabashedly. Unassuming Evelyn knew this person wasn’t a computer science or engineering student –“he was a history major, or something!” So, her whole schema was thrown off in her assumption that he would understand her more subtle way of asking him to back off and quit lecturing. Not to succumb to stereotypes, but usually history is considered to be a *social* science. Shouldn’t somebody who plans to have his life revolve around a social science for at least four years be a bit more socially adroit? One would think, but according to Evelyn, her interlocutor decided that her attempts to end the conversation by proving her expertise were really challenges in a religious debate.

Through her story, Evelyn explained that “I was trying to tell him about what it was like to grow up in California at a Christian church when everybody else was *not* Christian.” Subtext: she knows about Christianity. “But, he wanted to assume that because I didn’t grow up in South America I knew *nothing* about Catholic dogma. The story failed because he wasn’t listening.”

She just wanted to end the discussion and move on.

He took her linguistic cues as bright green lights.

“It made me feel irritated,” Evelyn said. “I was sharing something quite personal about my childhood and I felt he was using it for ammunition in his next argument. Unfortunately for my maturity, I am still quite irritated with him over this conversation.”

In the end, Evelyn abandoned her analogies and stories and started to treat her partner “as a literal computer scientist as opposed to a history major who could read social cues.”

The experience left a bitter taste in Evelyn’s mouth, but not without first nourishing her insight. “I now see,” she says, “that I had no chance of effectively communicating with him, and [I now] believe working with him was not and is not worth my time.”

The feeling must have been mutual –Evelyn’s partner ultimately switched groups.

Miscommunication in Learning Contexts

Working one-on-one with another cooperating person, such as when offering advice or tutoring, doesn't initially seem like the place to encounter major miscommunications –maybe a small one here or there (“I thought you were talking about *Searle* not that *girl!*”). But as the last two stories demonstrate, people must often find a middle ground in order for effective communication to take place.

Fast-Track to Frustration

“After all, when you come right down to it, how many people speak the same language even when they speak the same language?”

-Russell Hoban

Richard Norman likes to help people.

“It’s just kind of what I do,” the 30 year-old art student explains, half satisfied, half modest. “Everybody knows I’ve been around for a long time so like when they have questions [...] it’s really common that people will walk up to me and be like, “Hey, how do you do this?”

We’re sitting in the alumnae lounge in the UC during finals week and Rich is telling me about his most recent encounter with the complexities of communication. After receiving his first undergraduate degree in Architecture in 2002, he had taken some time off to work for the university and take additional courses until becoming a full-time student once again in 2009, this time pursuing an art degree. Since his own background is in a highly exact field, where a good ruler and a carefully planned time-

line are golden, he feels that he brings a fresh perspective to his new pursuits –as he calls it, he “reverse engineers.”

He recalls a specific time at the end of the fall 2009 semester when a fellow first-year art student was experiencing issues with a project. Rich’s reputation for helpfulness must have preceded him.

The point of this student’s project was “to cause that irritating sound [that occurs] when someone scratches a chalkboard.” It involved, according to Rich, a motor, an incline, bike chains, various pieces of metal and wood, and a “metal gauntlet hand” – the hand, of course, would be used to make that lovely sound.

The other student initially asked Rich to advise her on how best to fit the motor onto the rest of the assemblage, but when what Rich suggested seemed more elaborate than what the student had in mind, their interaction became less smooth.

“The motor didn’t have the right diameter,” Rich tells me. So, no matter how the other student tried to fit it into the rest of the project, it would still be too big. “It was like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.” So, he told her to “chop [the project] down and reshape it” in order to make the motor fit.

I can imagine what the girl was thinking –*chop down my project? The one I have already spent four consecutive days working on while eating only granola bars and Red Bull? I don’t think so.* Who could blame her?

But, “there were several components of the piece that [she] didn’t actually need,” Rich claims. But, “even for myself, I find it hard to understand suggestions when I feel that I’ve invested so much into an idea.”

Rich decided that the best way to help this student would be to carefully *show* her the best ways to adjust the project and produce that ear-drum rupturing noise – leading by example. “I literally just took some pieces that weren’t for the actual object, because [she] was so nervous about [her project] getting *ruined* and tired to show [her] like ‘look, there’s all these different things you can do and one of ‘em will work and you know it’s not going to hurt the aesthetic; it’s not going cause any problem.’”

But to complicate matters, this student had never taken a shop class, per se. According to Rich, students who haven’t taken the class are allowed to work in the shop, they just need somebody to explain what’s what before they begin. But, honestly, can the information obtained through a 45 second tutorial really be retained longer than, well, 45 seconds?

“For example,” [she] didn’t realize that there [were] band saws downstairs that are specific for metal,” Rich says. He asked her why she just [didn’t] use a band saw to alter her project, and then she said, “Well, they won’t let me cut metal.” Rich explained that that’s because the tools for metalwork are all in the downstairs. Or, Rich would tell the student to “grab x type of saw,” and she would grab the wrong one. Thanks to her limited knowledge, she wasn’t “understanding the language I was using. [She was] not used to the technical language of what tools are called and things of that nature.” She was, after all, a first semester freshman, aiming high like CMU students are prone to do.

But, rather than not comprehending her helper’s vision or language, “I think that ninety percent of the miscommunication happened because [she was] really frustrated,” Rich evaluates. Although he tried to patiently illuminate the words and concepts she

didn't understand, frustration had already claimed her as its own. She was frustrated because she couldn't find things, frustrated because she didn't have the depth of knowledge she needed to make his project work as smoothly as she planned, frustrated because it was due in less than 12 hours, frustrated because she didn't know the difference between a band-saw and a bevel.

It's easy to see why this student fell into frustration so easily. Rich supposes that she "thought [her project] was all just going to slide together and be done with." Then, when a more knowledgeable person was trying to tell her about all the different options and how to fix the problem and ultimately produce a better product, the student might have thought, in Rich's words, "Oh my god, this is way too complicated!" and shut down completely.

Although in the end, she took some of Rich's advice and her project turned out fine, many of us can relate to this overwhelmed emotion, laced with a deadline and perhaps even sprinkled with some dreary winter weather.

The Flight of the Linguist

If you wish to converse with me, define your terms."

-Voltaire

Would *you* use an ambiguous pronoun? (That's are I/you/he/she/it/them for those of you who haven't studied grammar since 8th grade)

Greg Brandt certainly would not. "I wouldn't use a pronoun without making it clear to whom I was referring," the senior linguistics and Mandarin Chinese double major says, offering an example of what he considers clear speaking and a simple act of common linguistic courtesy.

But, I ask Greg, what if a person is still confused by what you're talking about?

At this question, Greg, maintaining an even tone and stately composure, tells it like it is. "I would start from the beginning and make sure that everything I was saying was as clear as possible, like I was telling it to a four-year-old."

I feel a smirk begin curl the corners of my mouth.

Greg knows what I'm thinking.

“It would probably come of as condescending, but I would at least make sure that every small leap of logic or reasoning that I would otherwise take for granted [would be spelled] out in the actual redoing of this conversation.”

Scholars agree that breaking things down into bite-sized pieces is an absolutely wonderful strategy –when both speakers are fluent in the same language, that is. This is not always the case, as the huge number of people thrust into multi-lingual scenarios can attest to –all ambiguous pronouns aside.

As a matter of fact, our hero, Greg, has much experience with these situations, especially after spending a summer studying in China.

While in China, at the request of one of his Chinese professors, Greg took a part-time job tutoring her nephew in English. The nephew was preparing to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam. He wanted to go to nursing school in America and needed to pass this test to get into an English-speaking university.

“I was using Chinese as a sort of bridge to explain words that he, if I were to sort of circumlocute in English, he wouldn’t understand. So, I would try to circumlocute in Chinese,” he explains. “I couldn’t do direct translation –they were often sort of college-based texts talking about life on campus and interactions with professors. So, you know –talking about the little turns of phrase a professor might use in a lecture.”

You know –just your extremely useful, totally standard, mid-lecture chats about the hibernation patterns of bees.

Wait, I interrupt Greg. Bees, like *bzzz*, bees?

Yep, Greg assured me that one of the dialogs the TOEFL study-guide had invented as an educational tool featured our striped flying insect friends.

“I guess in English that wouldn’t be that hard to approach, but it’s a fairly specific topic for a non-native speaker,” Greg says, pausing. “I know I couldn’t speak in-depth about bees in Chinese.

Do you know the word for “bee” in Chinese? I ask.

“Um no,” Greg admits somewhat sheepishly. To get through this dialog with the student, “I drew a lot of pictures.”

But since drawing pictures really doesn’t involve words, and passing the TOEFL is not dependent on how cute of a bee you can draw, Greg had to find a way to use words. He decided to break things down about as far as they can go, opting for more generic vocabulary. Besides, when was the last time you saw “pollinate” on a vocabulary list in English or Chinese?

“So, in English, I wouldn’t necessarily say that the bee *eats* the nectar and then carries the pollen,” but his Chinese conversational skills only allowed for these more, well, conversational ways of rendering information. He was “using simplifications of the idea,” relying on every tool in his linguistic bridge-building kit to reach help his student reach an understanding of the material and to make sure that he himself was being clear, whether in English or Chinese. It was an effective discursive strategy –together the two interlocutors pooled their linguistic resources and worked together to construct a dialog they could both live with.

Maintaining a practiced coolness, Greg explains “my thought process was more strategic than emotional –I didn’t feel dishonest about it.” The fact that bees don’t actually eat pollen was less important, in Greg’s mind than “getting the vocabulary and broad ideas across. Knowing that bees are essential to plant life is way more important” –at least for an exam that tests ones ability to speak and write in English –“than knowing how they are.” Finding the common linguistic ground was the priority.

Greg does not know if his student passed the TOEFL exam. He departed China at the end of the summer, before the all-important exam date and hasn’t heard news of the results. He remains cheerfully optimistic about communication issues in general, spouting the adage “where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“If both parties want to communicate,” Greg philosophizes, “and there’s patience, there can be communication. It can be really frustrating, it can take a lot of time...even ET can communicate.” I began to imagine him less as a fellow student and more as a grizzled mountain-dwelling sage, with a TOEFL guide in one hand and a Chinese/English dictionary in the other.

“Even if there’s no shared language, you can interact with objects in the world and if you have patience time and a will to learn, it gives you a certain understanding and there can be successful communication.”

Thanks, Greg. Couldn’t have said it better myself.

Acknowledgements

I'm very grateful to the following people for their contributions, advice, support, and ideas. Thank you.

Interviewees

Barbara Johnstone

Jane Bernstein

&

Chris Neuwirth

Humanities Scholars '10

Jay Devine

Jill Sutter

Mandy Simons

Rick Sutter

Tim Haggerty

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