

“Comiletics”: Beyond the Monologic Model

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Abstract: In a culture that increasingly thinks in images, what are the implications on our evangelical stress of the text? How might we better understand and related to such a media-saturated audience? Is there a way to bridge a linear and more “pick-&-choose” method of sense-making? Considering the communication perspective of semiotics, this paper explores how it can enhance the preaching process by offering a broader grounding for our proclamation of truth.

And they were amazed and marveled, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language...? Acts 2:7-8 NASV

James Fowles, one of my student assistants, told this story of his church. Located in a Midwestern town of around 65,000 with a substantially sized state university, it had declining membership and was in danger of closing. The denomination offered aid in the attempt to revitalize it. A new pastor was appointed, and over the course of years, attendance mushroomed, mainly due initially to increased college-aged attendees (and this occurring with him preaching verse-by-verse on Sundays!) Among many changes that took place and in an effort to be better world Christians, the church developed a ministry in which they sell coffee beans from third-world farmers in order to insure the farmers receive fair market value for their crops. The profits earned support the church’s growing internship programs as well as going toward planting satellite campuses. A success story, right? (<http://munciealliance.org/>)

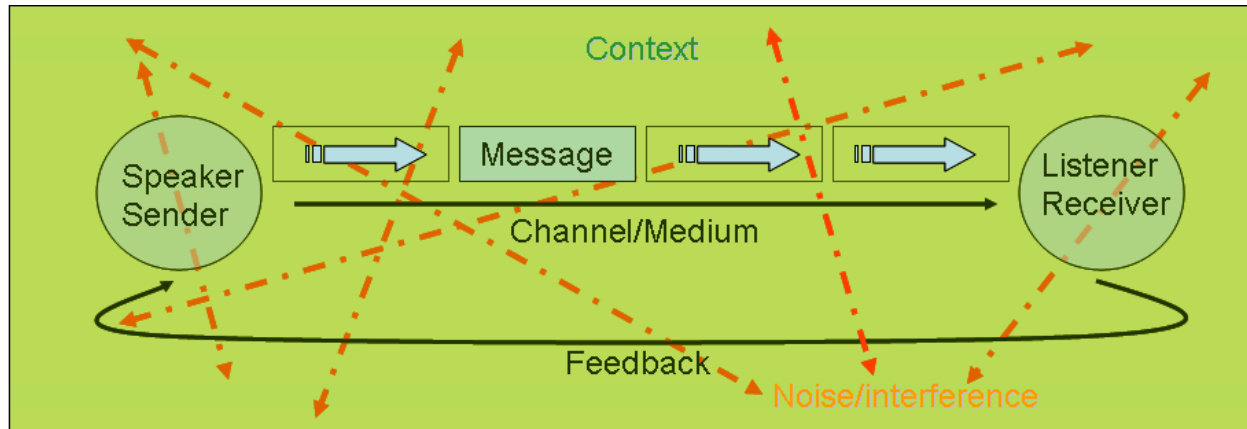
The pastor was asked a few years ago to talk at the denomination’s annual meeting about his growth strategy. His pastoral peers, pens and PDAs in hand, anxiously awaited the “five keys,” or “four steps,” or “three foundations” to explain the turnaround. They were disappointed. The pastor explained he had no preconceived master plan, he simply tried to act on what he and the church sensed they were hearing from the Spirit.

Communication as process

We evangelicals are literal philologists. We take words seriously, and none more so than scripture. We proclaim that within its pages, the Bible contains “everything we need for life and godliness.” Our seminaries stress exegesis, hermeneutics and homiletics in the training of those called to proclaim the message given to and processed through them. We are trained to be serious students of the Bible, so that we “rightly handle the word of truth.” There is a danger however. We know that this love of words does not automatically translate into a love of the Word.

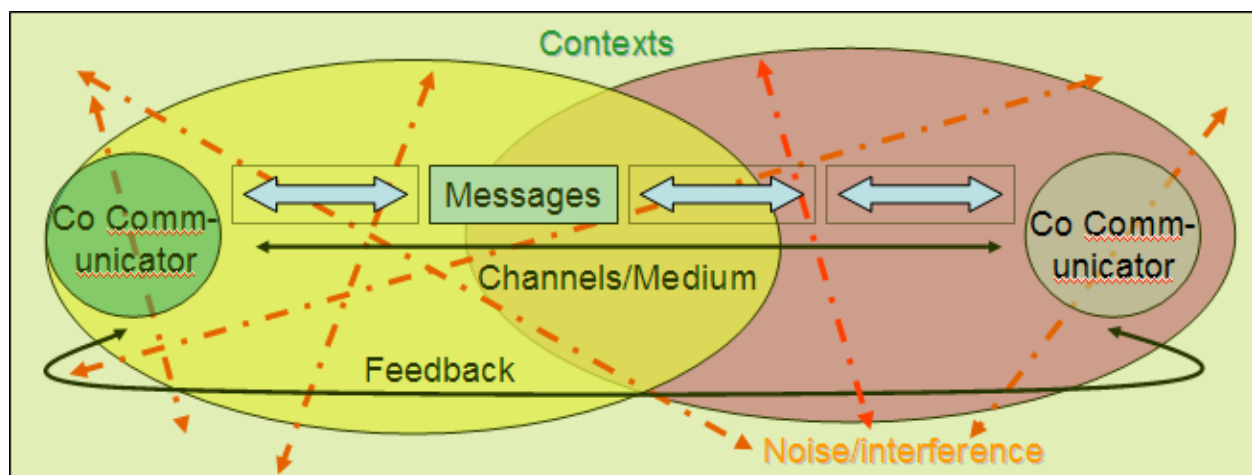
You can probably recall the model of communication you were taught years ago. As a professor of communication for over 18 years, I have had the “pleasure” of perusing many texts dealing

with the speaking process. There is much agreement about the basic elements of human communication: speaker, listener, message, medium/channel, context, interference/noise, and feedback. Most of us still carry within our minds what scholars in the field refer to as the linear model of communication:



Developed to help scientists working on telephone conversations, the model highlights a one-way, “taking-turns” perspective. Face-to-face interaction however is different, more complex. So, taking the same basic elements, this one-way model was updated to expand the coverage.

Newer models stressed an on-going, simultaneous process in human communication. Notice how names have been altered to highlight a more dynamic interaction. Rather than a sender/speaker and a receiver/listener, it shows two co-communicators who are *simultaneously* both sending AND receiving messages. The ovals are included to depict how the personal aspects of each communicator (experiences, education, values, etc.) can overlap and influence the process.



This second model is designed to stress that as people are speaking, so are they also simultaneously listening, that as they are sending messages, so are they also receiving messages, that the context in which they interact has many facets, not just one. Both of these models have a primary interest in depicting the process of communication, and in our culture with how that process can be more efficiently or effectively managed. (For more in-depth coverage of these

models and they can impact sermon creation and presentation, I recommend Chapter Two of Carrell (2000) entitled “The Co-creation of Meaning.”)

Semiotics

Our attention now focuses on a communication perspective that is not as well known, although that is changing due to its wide acceptance within postmodernism. This perspective was first suggested at the beginning of the 20th century and has two main branches, both focusing on the use of signs/symbols. Semioticians deal with “anything that can stand for something else, studying how meanings are made and how reality is represented” (Chandler, 2003, p. 2). Language fits into this perspective as words are understood as being signs.

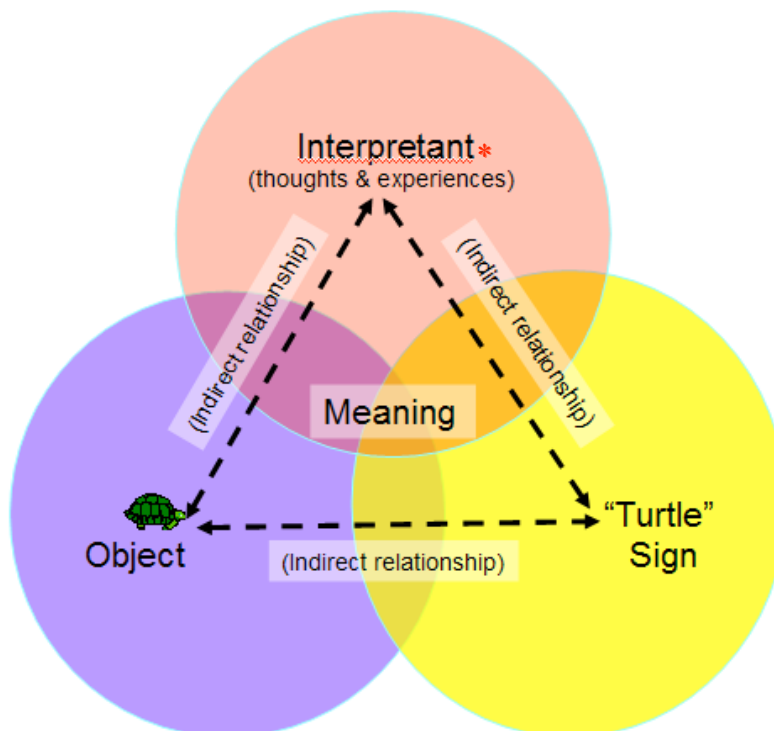
One branch was initially suggested by Ferdinand de Saussure who referred to “semiology” as a science which studies the *role of signs as part of social life* (Chandler, 2003, p. 18, italics added). He took a nominalist perspective, stating language does not “reflect” an a priori reality but rather “constructs” through words an understanding of what is perceived (Saussure, 1983, p. 71-2). It is with this perspective that many secular postmodernists feel most at home (for example: Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault.) For a readable and fair explanation and critique of these “big three” I would recommend James K. A. Smith’s *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism*, 2006.

The second branch was developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. He took what he referred to as a scholastic realist perspective (Peirce, 5.40, see also 6.605), which contends there are “universals” that have absolute existence prior to and independent of our knowledge of them. (For a more thorough explanation of the nominalist/realist dichotomy, see Hicks, 2003.) Peirce’s early ridicule of religious beliefs as being unscientific, was later reversed to reflect his new understanding in which “the real is paradoxically both immanent in and transcendent of the world.” (Brent, 1998, p. 19). In opposition to Cartesian dualism, he wrote of signs (of which he states written words are the primary example) being a link between our inner and outer worlds (ibid., p. 70). In Peirce’s mind, language symbols (words) act something like vehicles that can carry our minds from one realm to another. From a Christian perspective, it could parallel closely the manner in which God’s Kingdom is somehow simultaneously present and yet to come.

Both of these semiotic perspectives understand (1) that human perception is limited, as well as (2) the crucial role of language in the creation and understanding of our world. Nominalists would argue that our *language* determines the order of the *world* (that is, there is no structure or hierarchy that is pre-existent), the realist would argue that the *world* determines the order of our *language* (that is, attempts to make sense of a pre-existing structure) (Sturrock 1986, 17). Put another way, unlike the nominalist, the realist concludes that “universals” can exist without any person realizing it. The realist does not have to experience or perceive something in order to claim its existence. The realist would accept that Reality cannot be *fully* perceived, grasped, interpreted due to the finiteness of the human. Such an understanding leads to the conclusion that what we can perceive, grasp and interpret is *part of a whole*. Similar to a gemstone before a strong light source, different aspects of the stone are evident by the light reflecting off the varying planes of the stones angled surfaces. And, a different angle of observation would give a slightly different perspective of the stone, which is not invalid but only part of the whole which becomes evident when viewed from all perspectives.

Creation of meaning

When discussing how meaning is determined when symbols are used, Peirce developed a threefold model to explain. (I have added the colors which are not part of Peirce's monochromatic representation in an attempt to stress the blending that takes place in a three-dimensional process.)



Meaning (interestingly, a term from the field of mathematics suggesting an average) results from the interplay of the three elements. It is a mixture created by the blending impacts of cultural mores and personal experiences. As such, it would be possible for two people from the same culture to have different understandings of the same sentence, paragraph or book. We see this in our own evangelical worldview. Although there is united agreement on the fundamentals of our theological perspective, all of us do not interpret the words of the Bible to “mean” the same thing. The result is there are varying theological perspectives, varying denominational emphases, and varying criteria for membership and so on among those within the evangelical tradition. Peirce’s model (as well as a later and more recognized modification of it by Ogden and Richards in their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, 1923) should aid us in moving toward a larger perspective on how the communication process works. Meanings do not exist entirely in dictionary definitions, there is more to their story.

Did you notice the asterisk (*) I added next to the interpretant label in the diagram above? There is another element we must insist on being in this model if we are to use it. In order to clarify, I give this example. Most of us who have had numerous opportunities to create and proclaim a message have also had this perplexing experience. After the sermon is completed, someone comes up and tells us how we really spoke to them, especially in the section where we said xxx.

We do not recall ever saying xxx, yet it is what the congregant heard and received as a word of encouragement. They heard something we cannot remember saying. Why? The asterisk points to an additional element that can help us in fuller understanding of such occurrences.

Of course, this other element on which we must insist is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is His purpose to take the signs and symbols we have put together into a message (with His help) and translate them into the meanings needed for those who are able to hear (also with His help) in our audience. The interpretant in Peirce's model must be understood to be what C.S. Lewis called an "amphibian," that is, a spiritual being housed temporarily in a physical body and world. The Spirit is from the realm that is unfamiliar to us. As such, the Spirit is crucial in the proper creation of meaning, especially if we are to understand Truth that is beyond our physical abilities to perceive from a scientific perspective.

Word/symbols as vehicles

I use the term "word/symbol" in order to avoid a pervasive error. If you have ever begun a study of the Greek *λογος*, you quickly became aware of how pitifully inadequate the English term "word" can be when used as a synonymous translation (See Klappert, 1979, p. 1087-1117.) As a communication professor, I regularly wrestle with the varying nuances "word" embodies. I feel confident that though I study for the rest of my earthly life, I will never arrive at the place where I *fully* know the meaning of John's phrase that "the Word became flesh and dwelled among us" (the significance of the inclusion of the definite article in the original language not easily distinguished in an English translation.) I think you will agree that certainly our Lord is more than the simple squiggles our language has agreed to represent the Greek word/symbol. But, such squiggles act as vehicles that can, when properly used, take us on a journey toward fuller understanding.

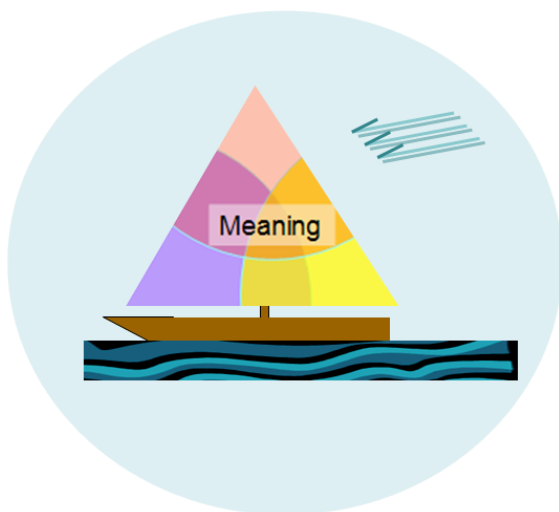
What do I mean that word/symbols act as "vehicles?" As always, metaphoric use is limited. When you determine to make a trip to a distant place for a conference, you most likely will be moved by various vehicles as part of that process. For example, you may ride your bicycle to the train station in order to get a ride to the local airport. While moving to your appointed gate, you could be transported by a moving sidewalk, escalator or golf cart. The jet will take you directly (if you are fortunate!) from the airport to your destination. Upon arrival, you hail a cab in order to get to the final hotel, where the elevator takes you to room where you want to be. Each "vehicle" used is *powered* in some manner to enable its purpose of moving objects. Without the power source, the vehicle would not move. If I point to a particular train and ask, is that the train to Indy, the answer is yes *and* no. Yes, it is scheduled to leave at 3:47 and is intended to arrive at Indy at 7:12. But, unless it starts moving in the intended direction, it is not yet the train to Indy.

For arguments sake, let's go back to Peirce's contention that word/symbols act as bridges between the immanent and transcendent (Brent, 1998, p. 19). When used to refer to spiritual realities, one side of the word/bridge rests on the bank of our physical world, the other goes through the mist to what we do not, in fact cannot, experience fully. As mentioned above, it is a realm which is however familiar to the Spirit. You recall Jesus' opening words in many of the parables? "The Kingdom of Heaven is *like*... (Matthew 13: 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47 NASV). We commonly do the same thing in our attempt to explain something unknown to another person.

We invite a colleague to attend a restaurant serving ethnic cuisine that is new to her. She asks us what to expect. We respond by saying a dish is “like” chicken, or potatoes, or mint tea. We find a common ground, and use it as a reference for the unknown.

Likewise, since Jesus, when speaking of the Kingdom is describing something that is “not of this world” (John 18:36 NASV), the attempt is being made to move from something the audience is familiar with in order to give a glimpse of something new. Their eyes must see and their ears must hear in a new way (Matthew 13: 10-16 NASV). Such transcendence is a primary ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13 NASV), sent to humankind at Jesus’ request (John 15: 26 NASV) to, as Paul puts it, “enlighten our vision” (Ephesians 1: 13-23 NASV). Hopefully we have had “aha!” experiences in our personal devotions; or while listening to another preach; or when preparing a sermon ourselves. The word/symbol takes us to previously unknown or unfamiliar places via the empowering ministry of the Spirit and it clicks, a new understanding has been born. Going back to the vehicle analogy, if the word is the vehicle, it is the Holy Spirit that acts as the Christian’s power source, allowing the vehicle of the biblical word/symbol to take us into such new realms of understanding.

Let’s now consider this same process from the perspective of the congregants who are hearing spoken words from a pulpit. After the preacher has done the exegetical, hermeneutical and homiletic work on a text under the guidance of the Spirit, a message is formed. As it is vocalized, that same Spirit (hopefully) has been invited to take the preacher’s word and establish it within those who are listening with ears to hear (see the opening quotation from Acts.) It’s as though on a Sunday morning we have come to a particular harbor of a vast sea (our local congregation), have gotten into our individual sailboats (the craft/vehicle created via interpretation of the word/symbols heard from the pulpit) and dropped anchor allowing the winds of the Spirit to direct our boats in the direction He deems. Hence, although there is much general agreement on what the preacher is proclaiming, different parts of the sermon can have different impact on the congregants as meaning becomes personalized. This gives insight into those times when we have “somehow” spoken to a diverse audience at varying levels simultaneously. (The diagram below is an attempt to visualize this process. Note the sail is from Peirce’s diagram above showing the locus of human meaning.)



The semiotic perspective allows us to better understand the communication process that takes place when the sermon is preached. When we get into our word/symbol boats, we should be aware of our great need for the wind power of the Spirit in our quest for movement to understanding, both corporate and personal. The word/symbol and the Spirit must be inseparable, a dynamic duo. As strongly as we proclaim to believe in and act on the Bible as God’s Word, we also need the corresponding strong claim and practice of dependence upon His Spirit. I like the word/symbol Leonard Sweet (2003) uses: we need to become *pneumanauts*.

I am reminded of the words of the Lord given through the prophet Nathan to David after he has expressed a desire to build a “house” for God:

...are you the one to build Me a house to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but *I have been moving about* in a tent, even in a tabernacle. 2 Samuel 7:5b-6 NASV

As we cast out upon the living waters portrayed by the biblical word/symbols, we make a point of remembering our simultaneous dependence upon the winds of the Spirit to direct us to His intended destination beyond the mist.

Sermon as dialogue

After explaining how word/symbols and people interact in the sense-making process, our attention turns fully to the preaching event. Although most of us are familiar with the “aha” experiences mentioned above in sermon preparation, we easily forget that the same type of new understanding can and does occur among our hearers as well. They are accessing our words via their own filters under the Spirit’s influence. The Spirit is vitally involved in the semantic process for both preacher and congregant.

Have you ever performed an etymological study of “homiletics”? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it has developed from a late Greek term for “conversation.” Similarly, “sermon” has roots from a Latin term for “conversation” as well. (OED, accessed <http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk>, 04-13-06). Seems that such an emphasis has been largely overruled or forgotten if one observes current practices.

That sermons are largely monologues is not necessarily bad, but I contend such a narrow focus misses expanding opportunities of understanding. As recent developments in the methods of worship have been prompted by those writers reminding us of its roots (for example, Navarro, 2005), perhaps the manner in which sermons are incorporated could be reconsidered and possibly readjusted to reincorporate more of these dialogical roots. I am not proposing major changes, rather a slight shift in focus and subsequent application, an increased emphasis of what many of us have already done.

While attending seminary, I was part of a local church that did something that I had never heard of or experienced. One of their multiple services had incorporated within the overall timeframe, a congregational feedback time. As I recall, it was of a limited timeframe and had printed guidelines in order to keep things orderly. For example, only one question or comment per person with each interaction understood to have an ideal limit of 3-4 minutes. After getting over my initial uncomfortableness, I found it often to be a wonderful addition to a worship service. Often, the insights, as well as questions that were verbalized by my fellow congregants, prompted not only deeper personal considerations, but more methods of application as well.

Since that time I have attended many more services that had space for dialogue. On one occasion, I took students to a nearby church we had read about in class. When the clock said the service was near the completion point, the ending was abrupt. As a speech teacher, I thought the speaker would lose points in my class for no transition or restatement of main idea(s). Afterwards, the pastor asked us into his “studio” (note, not “study”) for some interaction. When

questioned about the ending, he smiled and told me that he did not want the congregants to know when he was about to end as they tend to tune out. He was abrupt on purpose. After seeing my puzzled expression, he asked me to think back and tell him what I was thinking at the ending. First, I told him he would have lost points in my speech class as it wasn't according to Hoyle. Secondly, I began to reconsider what I recall him saying to see if I had missed something (a sneaky way to get ME to review!). Finally, I turned to the person next to me to ask for his input: ("Did that seem abrupt to you? Did I miss something?") The pastor exclaimed "Exactly!" He went to explain that as I was reconsidering and then turning to my pew mate, I was once again interacting with the concepts both intrapersonally and with my fellow human being interpersonally. Creative!

Hopefully, it is readily seen how such communication could be a prompt to further congregational conversations. And, depending on the church, could also prompt a great opportunity for ministry among the priesthood of believers. As each person shares insights or questions, their neighbor may have a different perspective that expands on what was heard. The sermon kept speaking. The Body had opportunity to minister (2 Cor. 1:1-7). The Truth became better understood.

There are many different methods for moving to a more dialogical, interactive format for our worship services which allow for greater understanding and application of a message. You may have already used pop quizzes, strategic questions, media clips, sermon notes, etc. (If you are interested in a brief overview of some higher tech methods, you might check the online article "Top 10 Ways Technology is Changing Ministry Communication," Wilhite, 2006). What I am desirous of doing is encouraging you to do even more. Allow the Spirit access to your creative juices so that new applications can be tried. As you pray and receive instruction, ask for validation from others afterward that such inclusions were a vital part of the intended worship. You may just find, as I have, that when you trust enough to take the risk, you may get ideas to include with that congregation on that particular day. And, you may find yourself in the dual role of both proclaimer and listener as you avail yourself to His leading. You simultaneously are listening to the words you are uttering, finding them to impact, uplift, encourage and confront you. Scary? Yes, but also exciting. Failure? Sometimes. Overall, it has stretched me in many ways and initiated a renewed sense of awe and wonder for this divine gift of communication.

Semiotics can expand our understanding while helping us better interact with contemporary culture. I have briefly touched on one aspect here. I am not arguing for a *carte blanche* homiletic overhaul, rather for the contemplation of how the preacher can aid in helping congregants better understand communication and hopefully how preachers can become better tools through which the Spirit can work. Amen.

So, what did the initial church story have to do with all this discussion anyway???

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