

The Unspoken Rules of Communication and Their Connotative Meanings

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship level and connotative meanings of communication and how they apply to interactions one might have with another person. These interactions can vary from person to person and from conversation and conversation. That can also vary based on the relationship that one has with the person being spoken to.

Bickmore (2004) suggests that:

“Our face-to-face interactions with other people are governed by a complex set of rules, of which we are mostly unaware. For decades now, social scientists have been unraveling the threads of face-to-face interaction, investigating everything from descriptions of body posture used to indicate interest in starting a conversation, to eye gaze dynamics used to convey liking or disliking, to the myriad ways that language can convey attitude, social status, relationship status, and affective state.”

The end result being, that no specific set of rules can be set. There are so many factors that can be applied to certain aspects of a conversation that it would be difficult to pinpoint any one specific rule set.

Keywords: denotative meaning, connotative meaning, content level, relationship level

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When having a conversation with a person, there are certain rules that each individual person follows when speaking with said person. This could be because one set of rules a person has for talking with one person, may not be the same as when talking to another. A good example of this is when you think of talking to someone who is of a different age than you self. You are not going to talk to an elder the same way you talk to someone who is the same age as you or younger than you. The same situation can apply to someone you just met versus someone you have known for years. Whether it is online via instant message, face to face, or even face to screen when chatting with someone over video chat, we follow these unwritten rules we have set for ourselves and they drive our conversations.

While discussing these unwritten rules an important thing to remember is that people will have their own denotative and connotative meanings. According to Young and Travis (2004), denotative meaning is the "dictionary definition of a word" and connotative meaning includes "the feelings and emotions people attach to a word". This is important because it is part of the reason why certain rules of communication have remained unspoken, anyone could have their own unwritten rules about communicating with another person that they follow.

According to Bickmore (2004), "Social scientists have long recognized the utility of making a distinction between conversational behaviors, such as head nodding and conversational function, which is the role played by the behavior, such as acknowledgment" (p. 38). On top of this, there are two levels of meaning to a statement that a person makes, further complicating the ability for there to be a set of rules to be established. These two levels are content level and relationship level which can be applied to the earlier stated connotative meaning. When a statement is translated on the content level it refers to the factual interpretation of words and

when translated on the relationship level refers to communicating something about your relationship with the other person (Young & Travis, 2004).

The relationship level can lead to confusion between two people and this associated with connotative meanings can often make conversation a difficult road to walk on. As we make symbol choices, it is imperative to think about how we view the world based on the words we use to describe it (Young & Travis, 2004). This is why we establish rules for ourselves in order to make sure our interactions with others go smoothly. This could be something as simple as making sure that you address a certain person with respect or making sure you do not bring up certain topics with a friend because you know it will upset them. Taking this into consideration there can be any infinite amount of unspoken rules for communication that any one individual can use or a group of people can use as a whole. The ability to list a specific few would be difficult for anyone simply because it can differ from person to person and the conversations they have experienced over time.

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