THE BERLO MODEL OF COMMUNICATION *aka Berlo's S-M-C-R model*

source	**message**	**channel**	**receiver**
communication skills	elements + structure:	seeing	communication skills
knowledge	content	hearing	knowledge
social system	treatment	touching	social system
culture	code	smelling	culture
attitudes		tasting	attitudes
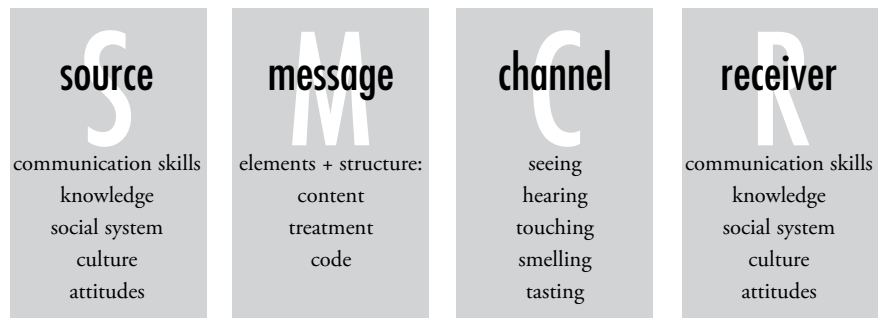
David Berlo's SMCR Model (1960) proposes that there are five elements within both the source/encoder and the receiver/decoder which will affect fidelity.

SOURCE–RECEIVER RELATIONSHIP

Berlo's approach is rather different from what seems to be suggested by the more straightforward transmission models in that he places great emphasis on **dyadic** (having two elements) communication, therefore stressing the rôle of the *relationship* between the source and the receiver as an important variable in the communication process.

As you will see from what follows, he enumerates what are the factors to be taken into account at each 'end' of the communication. Thus, for example, in principle, the more highly developed the communication skills of the source and the receiver, the more effectively the message will be encoded and decoded. In fact, however, the relationship between skill level of receiver and source needs to be taken into account, since, as Berlo points out:

A given source may have a high level of skill not shared by one receiver, but shared by another. We cannot predict the success of the source from her skill level alone.
Berlo (1960)

A **monadic** (a single unit) approach to the communication act would tell us much about the communication skill level, personal characteristics etc. of both source and receiver. In doing so, it might tell us about the general competence of both, but it doesn't allow us to make any firm predictions about the likely success of the communication. The communication studies teacher may have a seductive tone of voice, may be considered by the students to be 'one of them', may have expert and wide-ranging knowledge of communication theory, may have great enthusiasm for the subject; the student may be highly intelligent, articulate, literate and diligent. However, if the student finds communication theory pointless, boring and a load of hot air, then, clearly, fidelity will be far less than desirable.

THE "SOURCE" OF COMMUNICATION (ALSO APPLIES TO "RECEIVER")

There are five verbal communication skills, according to Berlo:
Two are encoding skills (see Shannon-Weaver: the encoder): *speaking* and *writing*

Two are decoding skills (see Shannon-Weaver: the decoder): *listening* and *reading*

The fifth is crucial to both encoding and decoding: *thought* or *reasoning*,
though you may perhaps wish to object that to place such emphasis on reasoning, what we generally think of as an intellectual skill, to the detriment of emotion or feeling, is unreasonable.

As encoders our communication skills level affects our communication fidelity in two ways, according to Berlo:
• it affects our ability to analyse our own purposes and intentions, our ability to say something when we communicate
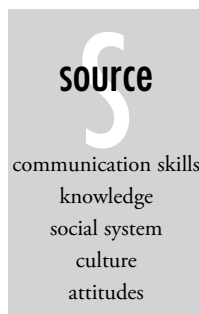• it affects our ability to encode messages which say what we intend. Our communication skills,

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source
communication skills ←
knowledge
social system
culture
attitudes

our facility for handling the language code, affect our ability to encode thoughts that we have. We certainly all have experienced the frustration of not being able to find the 'right word' to express what we want to say. Bearing in mind Berlo's insistence on the dyadic nature of communication, we need to remember that finding the 'right word' is not simply a matter of finding one which expresses what we want to say to our own satisfaction. It also has to have approximately the same meaning for the receiver as it does for us.

There is evidence that our ability to use language actually affects the thoughts themselves. The words we can command, and the way that we put them together affect
• what we think about
• how we think
• whether we are thinking at all
There is little disagreement amongst communication and cultural studies theorists today that the codes we use (verbal or otherwise) affect the way we see the world and the way we think about it. Our experience of the world is thus a function of the codes we use, as is what we can express about that experience.

Whether this firm conviction amongst theorists is justified is a moot point, but, if we assume that they are right, then it follows that the fewer the linguistic resources we have at our disposal, the less rich our experience of the world is and the less we are able to express about that experience (hence, for example, the truism that even English people would benefit from learning a foreign language since it would give them a different way of looking at and experiencing the world). If we do not have the communication skills necessary to encode accurately then we are limited in our ability to express our purposes, indeed even in the purposes we can have in the first place. Our communication skills deficiencies limit the ideas that are available to us and limit our ability to manipulate these ideas (to think).

We can summarize by saying that communication skills involve:
• knowing and applying the code's grammar
• knowing and using a broad vocabulary
• knowing and applying the conventions
• adapting the use of your code to your audience
this latter requirement again underlining the dyadic approach to communication.

"SOURCE" – KNOWLEDGE LEVEL

source

communication skills
knowledge
social system
culture
attitudes
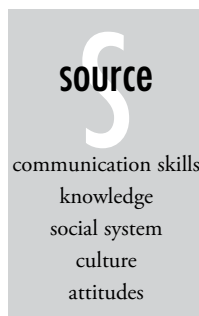
The encoder's communication behaviour is affected by his/her knowledge of:
• **his/her own attitudes** - For example, if you are aware of an attitude which might, in the presence of any given receiver, arouse hostility, then you will be aware that it would be appropriate to conceal that attitude. Clearly, if you are unaware of the attitude, then you will not attempt to conceal it and your communication may fail as a result, despite whatever other skills you may have.
• **the ways in which s/he can produce or treat messages** - you need to be aware of the possibilities open to you. For example, many people's experience of the Internet is limited to using the Web; it could well be that getting your message to your audience would be better served by some kind of listserve.
• **the kinds of choices s/he can make about communication channels etc.** - If you don't know that e-mail exists and send all your communications via snail-mail, then your competitors will be communicating faster than you.
• **the subject matter** - if you know nothing about cars, how do you begin to tell the mechanic what's wrong with yours. You can describe all the symptoms of course, but it's quite likely that you omit the one vital squeak or jerk which would lead the mechanic immediately to the source of the problem, simply because you don't know enough to determine that it was vital.

All of these factors apply equally to the decoder/receiver.
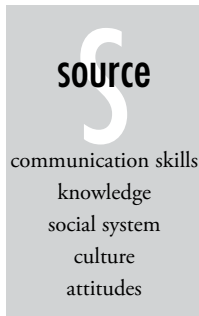
"SOURCE" – SOCIO-CULTURAL LEVEL

No source communicates as a free agent without being influenced by his/her position in a socio-cultural system. People in differing social classes communicate differently. Social and cultural systems partly determine

1) the word choices which people make
2) the purposes they have for communicating
3) the meanings they attach to certain words
4) their choice of receivers
5) the channels they use for this or that kind of message etc.

Here are examples of each of those. You'll see, though, that it's a bit artificial to try to disentangle them in this way:

1) the authoritarian father who is not in a position of authority at work will speak very differently to his boss and his children. An inability to adjust his communication as appropriate to the two positions could well spell dire trouble at work.

2) people's purposes for communicating will depend very much on the rôle they are currently playing, whether their rôle at work, customer in a shop, teenager with friends, teenager in the family home etc.

3) there are clear differences in the meaning of words between teenagers and older people - 'wicked', 'bad' etc.

4) some social positions, e.g. teacher or receptionist, are communication-prone; others, such as night-watchman, will involve relatively little communication.

5) an obvious cultural difference between the British and the French is the extent to which each culture uses touch in interpersonal communication.

The decoder-receiver can also be spoken of in terms of communication skills, attitudes, knowledge level and socio-cultural position.
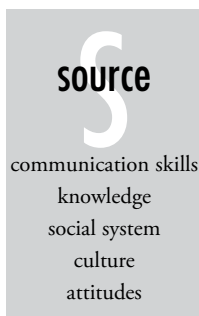
"SOURCE" – ATTITUDES

Attitude towards self – A student considers himself a bit of a dolt. As a result, he has become wary of asking questions. As a result of that wariness, many of the questions he does ask are formulated hesitantly, with a self-deprecating tone almost inviting dismissal. This student's attitude to himself clearly affects the success of his communication.

Attitude towards subject matter – Interest and prejudice will play a rôle here. For example, the subject matter of the discussion is computers and how to improve their performance. If you find them boring and couldn't give a damn about megabytes, gigabytes, ROM, RAM and blahdeblah, even if you have a very sound understanding of the terminology, then much of the message is obviously just going to pass you by

Attitude towards receiver – In your opinion, the person you are speaking to is stupid. You will certainly formulate your message differently from the way you formulate it for your intelligent friends, you may even some parts of the message as too complex for her to understand.

Berlo lists five factors which affect your transmission of your message. You will make a number of assumptions about those same five factors in the receiver. Your encoding of your message will be influenced by those five factors in you, but also by your assessment of how those same five factors affect the receiver's ability to receive your message. I guess you can see the circularity there - you are influenced by five factors which you make assumptions about in your receiver who makes assumptions about those five factors in you while receiving the message and, so on as the conversation continues.

All of the factors above apply to the receiver as they do to the source.

message
M

elements + structure:
content
treatment
code

"MESSAGE"

As you can see from the model, the essential elements which Berlo identifies for discussion under the heading of message are Code, Content, Treatment

Code
Whenever we encode a message, we must make certain decisions about the code we will use. We must decide:
• which code
• what elements of the code
• what method of structuring the elements of the code we will select

Content
Content is the material in the message that was selected by the source to express his/her purpose. It, like code, has both elements and structure. If you have five assertions to make, you must structure them - you must impose one or another order on them. The ways you choose to arrange assertions in part determine the structure of the content.

Treatment
The treatment of the message is the decisions which the source makes in selecting and arranging both code and content.

In preparing her copy for a newspaper a journalist treats her message in many ways. She selects content that she thinks will be interesting to her reader; she selects words from the code that she thinks her reader will understand; she structures her assertions, her information, in the way that she thinks her reader will prefer to receive them.

The editor will make decisions regarding type size to let her reader know she considers some things more important than others. She will put some stories on page 1 and others on page 11.

All these decisions are treatment decisions. They are ways in which the source chooses to encode his message by selecting certain elements of code and content and presenting them in one or another treatment.

When we decode messages we make decisions as to the sources purpose, their communication skills, their attitude towards us, their knowledge, their status. We try to estimate what kind of person would have produced this kind of message, an estimation which depends on the source's treatment of the message.

channel
C

seeing
hearing
touching
smelling
tasting
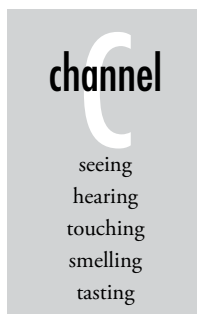
"CHANNEL"

In communicating, the source has to choose a channel to carry his/her message. Media buyers (the people in advertising agencies who buy television time or space in newspapers), for example, have to decide what is the best channel or combination of channels. Media selection is limited by

• what is available
• how much money can be spent
• what the sources preferences are
• which channels are received by the most people (at optimum cost)
• which channels have the most impact, etc.
In everyday life we have to make similar decisions: would a verbal message such as 'please go away' (or even some slightly different treatment of that message!) be as effective as a punch on the nose?