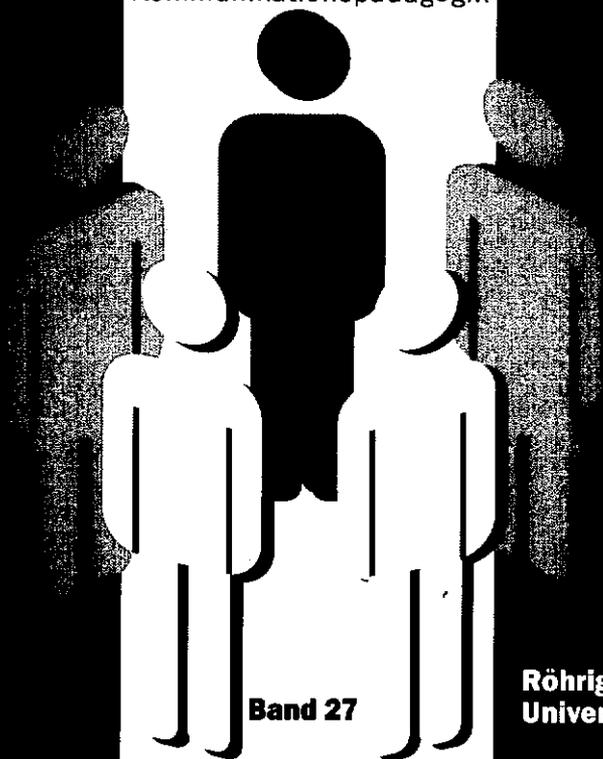


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Applied Communication in Organizational and International Contexts

SPRECHEN & VERSTEHEN

Schriften zur
Kommunikationstheorie und
Kommunikationspädagogik



Band 27

Röhrig
Universitätsverlag

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The Role of Linguistics and Philosophy in the Application of Communication Theories in Organizational Contexts

I. The Issue

“No theory, please!” is an often heard request when companies negotiate in-service training for their employees with human resources agencies. “No theory” in seminars and workshops is a justifiable guideline when it is meant as a paraphrase of “Please do not lecture us. What we need is practical training or at least something related to our practice.” – “No theory, please!” however, should not be confused with a teaching method that is not based on theoretical assumptions and empirical research. Any training that is not backed up by research runs the risk of being counterproductive and is certainly not worth being called a teaching method.

In this paper I will analyse three different prototypical approaches to the teaching of communication in organizational contexts. I will discuss them in the light of linguistic and philosophical theories. Instead of viewing these theories as abstractions of methods that work, they will be conceived as being indispensable to the development of “nuts and bolts approaches.” I shall argue, firstly, that the notion of “applied” in “Applied Linguistics and Applied Philosophy” presupposes the notion of “Theory,” and, secondly, that the application of communication theories in organizational contexts could be a classic case of a win-win situation, provided “practice” is not viewed as the antithesis of “theory.”

II. Serendipity, Nuts and Bolts, and Ockham's Razor

The following quote comes from Jim Thomas's (2005) “Negotiate to Win,” a book advertised as “the ultimate handbook of negotiating” and “The only negotiating book you'll ever need”:

The client's instructions were very specific: 'I don't want any theory. ... Just give me the stuff that works. If you have any doubts about something, leave it out.'

In short, take Ockham's Razor to the subject of negotiating. I read everything I could find on the topic. And the more I read, the more frustrated I became. Practically nothing passed the Razor test. ... Instead of the nuts-and-bolts guidance, I found theory, folklore, trivia, clichés, and war stories. Here's a brief, Razor-eye view of some of negotiation's 'accepted wisdom': ... (p. 7).

The author then goes on to denounce what he refers to as "the academic approach" and all other things that, according to him, do not work, such as wearing "power colours" and the shape of the negotiation table.

There are three intriguing aspects involved in this quote: Firstly, the concept of Ockham's Razor has not been fully understood, which is sad in a book that claims to be based on it, but not a surprising view held by an author who denounces the academic approach and prefers the nuts-and-bolts approach. Secondly, we may be permitted to ask why such an ardent advocate of the nuts-and-bolts approach and such a staunch adversary of the academic approach has gone to the trouble of making a 14th century philosopher the champion of his philosophical theory and the alleged test criterion of negotiating strategies. And thirdly, one wonders, why this author, who, like many others, argues in favor of a win-win strategy, does not apply it when Ivory Tower meets Boardroom.

Let us turn to the 14th century philosopher William of Ockham.

"Occam's razor (sometimes spelled Ockham's razor) is ... taken today as a heuristic maxim that advises economy, parsimony, or simplicity in scientific theories. Occam's razor states that the explanation of any phenomenon should make as few assumptions as possible, eliminating those that make no difference in the observable predictions of the explanatory hypothesis or theory. The principle is often expressed in Latin as the *lex parsimoniae* (law of succinctness): *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, which translates to: *entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity*" (Wikipedia 2007).

By way of illustrating Ockham's Razor as a heuristic principle, I will chose an example from phonetics:

The letter <l> in English can be pronounced as palatalized [l̥] or as velarized [ɫ]. (There are also the possibilities of devoiced [l̥̥] and the so-called "silent l", which we need not go into for the purpose of our illustration of how to evolve a theory via the compilation of data and the formulation of hypotheses.) Let us assume that a phonetician in his attempt to work out the rules for the distribution of these two sounds has collected the following data:

(a) [l̥v] live (b) [b̥v̥b] bulb (c) [fi:-] feel (d) [«bles̥»] blessing

In the light of these data his first attempt at stating the rules might be:

- (i') [l̥] ⇒ in word-initial position: as in (a) [l̥v]
- (ii') ⇒ after [b] as in (d) [«bles̥»]
- (iii') [-] ⇒ in word-final position: (c) [fi:-]
- (iv') ⇒ before [b] as in (b) [b̥v̥b]

Later, more data are brought to light, and the data available to him are given in the following extended list:

(a) [l̥v] (b) [b̥v̥b] (c) [fi:-] (d) [«bles̥»]
 (e) [l̥mps] glimpse (f) [m̥-k] milk (g) [»f̥l̥t̥v̥p] fill it up

The rules will now have to be adjusted in a second attempt:

- (i'') [l̥] ⇒ in word-initial position: [l̥v]
- (ii'') ⇒ in consonant clusters at the beginning of a word: [«bles̥»] [l̥mps]
- (iii'') [-] ⇒ in word-final position: [fi:-]
- (iv'') ⇒ in consonant clusters at the end of a word: [m̥-k] [b̥v̥b]
- (v'') ⇒ [»f̥l̥t̥v̥p] is an exception

In the third attempt no more data are considered, but the rules are revised:

- (i''') ⇒ before a vowel ⇒ [l̥].
- (ii''') ⇒ in all other cases ⇒ [-].

We must concede that none of the above rules (from i' to ii''') is wrong. The set of rules formulated in the third attempt, however, will be given preference, because it explains the distribution of the two sounds of English with only two rules as opposed to the four rules needed in the first attempt and the four rules plus one exception in the second attempt. According to Ockham's Razor the third theory is superior to the other two not because one saves ink, or space and time formulating them, but because the other two have missed important generalizations: Their explanatory power is, thus, weaker than that of the third attempt.

It is also worth noting that the theory requiring fewer rules is not necessarily the simpler one. In order to understand rule (i''') one has to realise that English links the last consonant of a word to the first vowel of the following word, as in [ɸf1 ^<t √p], which explains why the pronunciation of "fill" has a velarized /l/ in sentence-final position and when followed by a consonant, and a palatalized /l/ when it is linked to a following consonant. The phonetics of English thus cuts across word and morpheme boundaries.

Is this objection to Jim Thomas's treatment of Ockham's Razor relevant? I believe that it is and that there are practical consequences for the following reasons:

1. If consultants are not familiar with the work of a 14th century logician, no harm is done. If, however, they do quote Ockham and claim that his principle is essential to their work, then they must be prepared to be judged by their understanding and application of that theory.

2. Thomas offers twenty-one rules of negotiating, supplemented by an even larger number of subrules, which he refers to as "Thomas's Truisms". He does not explain whether these rules are exhaustive, covering the whole range of negotiation possibilities and whether there is a hierarchy among them and if they might be reduced to a smaller number. In other words, he does not apply Ockham's Razor to the system of rules set up by himself.

3. Leaving out criteria is not the same as applying Ockham's Razor. "Keeping it simple" does not relieve authors and coaches of the burden of proof that what they eliminate does not affect the explanatory power and "makes no difference in the observable predictions of the

explanatory hypothesis or theory.” In his chapter “Trashing the Hallowed Halls of Hagglng” (p. 6), which can be paraphrased as “Forget everything you’ve ever read about negotiating.” Thomas’s conclusion is: *“In fact, after almost thirty years in this business, I can honestly say that I don’t know of any physical factor that has so much as a measurable effect on negotiated outcomes. Not one. When you Razor-cut it, much of negotiation’s folklore turns out to be fiction”* (p. 9). Admittedly, the criterion of “measurable effect” comes under the heading of “observable predictions.” But when Thomas keeps using elements of the English language, such as “in fact” and “honestly,” he is only paying lip service to Ockham’s Razor because he does not inform us of any tests in which the variables, such as physical factors, have been isolated to test any measurable effect they may or may not have. The lack of a theoretical background can be demonstrated by revealing firstly, that the book is not backed up by empirical research, and secondly, that the principle of freedom of internal contradictions has not been applied. After his devastating appraisal of any theory that attaches any importance to physical factors (see the above quote), he says that one of Thomas’s Truisms “suggests nice things like praise, apologies, and comfortable physical arrangements” (p. 128).

III. Monosystemic vs. Polysystemic

It is often claimed that the overall effect of a message in face-to-face communication can be broken down as follows: 7 % of the information is conveyed through the text, i.e. the verbal message; 38 % through the voice, and 55 % through body language. This fallacy has become known as the 7-38-55 formula and is often quoted in organizational contexts. A detailed account of it can be found in Lenhart and Wachtel (2001), who trace the origin of this myth back to Mehrabian’s studies of one-word utterances in 1967.

The most important factor that invalidates the application of the formula to face-to-face communication is that these findings, which were established in a carefully defined and very limited situation (i.e. one-word utterances said out of context) cannot be applied to all types of communication. This is the danger of all monosystemic approaches.

Nobody would seriously consider arguing the word “huggybear” spoken softly with breathy voice by her into his ear in a moonlit night would have the same percentage of nonverbal information as telling someone the password he had forgotten.

The following observations are counterarguments against the inherently monosystemic approach to communication of the 7-38-55 formula, which purports to be applicable to all situations, interlocutors and utterances:

1. Interpersonal relationships are often tentatively and cautiously negotiated by signaling a change of attitude by a new voice quality. The importance of voice quality in specific situations can easily be demonstrated by the way adults address babies or very young children, who may not yet be able to understand all the verbal cues but who need to be assured that the speaker means no harm. This must be distinguished from, for instance, giving directions, where the verbal message “Turn left at the second set of traffic lights” is all that matters.

2. The amount of information conveyed cannot be determined exclusively by analysing the sender’s utterance, because what the receiver gets out of the message is largely dependent on his experience, knowledge and expertise. So the listener/observer may get more information out of the signals than the speaker had intended to convey.

3. The more a speaker’s habitually adopted voice quality deviates from the norm, the greater the influence of vocal features on the listener.

4. There is also a qualitative criterion in terms of the truth value of utterances: Whenever the vocal message contradicts the verbal message, the listener believes the former. It is difficult to see how this phenomenon can be incorporated in the 7-38-55 formula.

The proponents of the 7-38-55 formula might now take the following line: “Alright, don’t let’s quibble about the exact percentage. Our formula was intended to be interpreted only as a didactic statement in the first place. What we had in mind was the old truism ‘It’s not what you say but how you say it’ in order to stress the importance of the voice.” The fact, however, remains that they did quote very precise percentages, which always presupposes empirical research and a supe-

riority over folk wisdom. The practical consequences might be that in training and coaching one should devote only 7% of time and effort to the improvement of the trainee's choice of words: *ex falso quodlibet!* (Given false assumptions, anything can be deduced.)

IV. In Search of the "true" Meaning of Words

Laymen are often fascinated by discovering the origin of words. It is, of course, interesting to know that the English word "window" has its origin in the Old Norse word *vindauga*, i.e. "the wind's eye." But what does a layman do with this knowledge? He may entertain his friends with it and win prizes in quiz shows, but his knowledge of present-day English and how words are used and understood today has not increased at all. The branch of linguistics that studies the origin of words is called "etymology," and this is derived from ancient Greek *etymon*, which means "original meaning." The Greek word *etymos*, meaning "true" should not be understood as the etymologists' claim to find the "true" meaning of words. The notion of "true meaning" is meaningless. We do not ask for the "true time" when we wish to know the correct time. We may ask what a word really means, i.e. how it is actually used, but "true" does not meaningfully collocate with "meaning." The meaning of a word does not exist independently of the community of speakers; it can only be analysed by studying how it is used today by native speakers of the language. If, for instance, a person addresses a judge by saying "My Lord," it would be absurd to ask that speaker why he refers to a judge as "the keeper of the bread," arguing that this was the true meaning of the word. It would be even more senseless to tell him, "Well, you may not have noticed it, but that is what you really meant, because that is the true meaning of the word." Nobody in the English speaking world of today uses "lord" in the sense of the Old English compound *hlafweard* ("the guardian of the bread"), that became contracted to "*hlaford*." Today, the form "lord" represents a different lexeme with a completely different meaning, i.e. it is neither intended by the speaker nor interpreted by the hearer as conveying its Old English meaning.

There is a surprising number of authors and coaches who use etymology in precisely the described way. It has the ring of being scientific, but etymology does not have any psychological applications. In their book *Du bist was du sagst. Was unsere Sprache über unsere Lebenseinstellungen verrät* (*You are what you say. What our language says about our views towards life*), Joachim Schaffer-Suchomel and Klaus Krebs (2006) advise their readers: “Listen carefully to what other people say and to the effect their words have!” That, indeed, is sound advice. But they go on to say, “Wenn Sie sich *beschweren*, machen Sie sich *schwer*.” A translation of this sentence into English is, “When you complain about something, you make yourself heavy,” which does not make much sense when you use it in a context such as: A: “Der Rasenmäher macht so einen Krach vor dem Tagungsraum.” (“The lawnmower is making a terrible racket outside the conference room!”) - B: “Wir haben uns schon darüber *beschwert* und der Hotelmanager hat versprochen, nach der Kaffeepause für Ruhe zu sorgen.” (“We’ve already complained about it and the hotel manager has promised to make sure we will have a bit of peace and quiet after the coffee break.”) The reason Schaffer-Suchomel’s and Krebs’s quote seems to make sense is that the German word for “complain” has the morpheme “schwer” (= heavy) in it. There is, however, no evidence that German speakers – consciously or subconsciously – use “beschweren” in any other way than English speakers use “complain.”

The authors claim to raise language awareness for the purpose of personality development. Their analysis of the language, however, often amounts to little more than a play with words: “Mittels Sprache kann der Mensch so *be-g-reifen*, also auch *greifen* und *reifen*” (“Through language man can understand, i.e. *grasp* something and *mature*”) (2006:73). The German verb “begreifen” means “to understand, to grasp (the meaning of something).” It is open to debate whether German speakers realise that “begreifen” does, indeed, consist of the prefix “be-“ plus the verb “greifen” (to grasp, to seize) when they say, “Ich hab’s begriffen” (“I’ve got the message”). But Schaffer-Suchomel’s and Krebs’s second hyphenation of *be-g-reifen* constitutes a completely arbitrary splitting up of letters that is not justified by any morphological, phonetic or semantic analysis. None of

my informants associated the lexeme “reifen” (to mature) with “begreifen.” As a matter of fact, I was never able to talk them into it and they reacted irritably when I asked them to “listen carefully” to “reifen” in the word “begreifen” and the meaning it conjures up. One might just as well argue, “Listen carefully to *be-g-r-ei-fen*! There is the word “ei” (egg) in the middle of it, which conjures up associations of fertility. So by using this verb what you were really saying is that through grasping (greifen) the idea, you have managed to mature (reifen) and you are passing on an egg (ei) as the symbol of the fecundity of your newly acquired knowledge.”

Schaffer-Suchomel and Krebs claim, “Sprachanalytisch trainierte Coachs haben ein feines Gehör und Gespür für Sprache und ihre Wirkkraft” (“Linguistically trained coaches and consultants have a good ear and an acute feeling for language and its effect”) (2006:24). This is certainly true, but the concept of “linguistically trained” does not seem to apply to the two authors themselves. They argue that English “*terribly good*” is a double bind, and their analysis of “Selbständige haben es einfach schwer.” (Things are simply very difficult for self-employed people) is: “Ja, was nun, haben sie es einfach oder haben sie es schwer?” (“So what do you mean: Is it simple or is it difficult?”) (2006:240). An immediate constituent analysis of “*terribly good*” reveals that it is an endocentric subordinate construction, and, more specifically, an adjective phrase, where “good” is the head and “terribly” is the modifier. This is clearly distinct from “*terrible and good*,” which is an endocentric coordinative construction. Linguistically trained coaches ought to be aware of distinctions that native speakers make rather than confusing the issue in order to make observations about supposedly sophisticated uses of double binds.

V. Summary

So what is the *damage* done by unfounded statements that come in the guise of scientific facts? Or, put differently, what is to be *gained* by getting the facts right?

Human Resources and Consulting firms provide advice to their clients regarding, for example, productivity, employment relationships of

their global workforce, and, perhaps most importantly, communication. The clients pay their consultants and are entitled to being treated with respect. One should respect everybody's intellectual dignity. There is no obligation to lecture the trainees or to expound theories to them if they prefer the nuts-and-bolts approach. This, however, is no excuse for not being familiar with theories and empirical research in the numerous areas of communication, ranging from rhetoric to negotiation. The problem inherent in communication training is that communication is incredibly complex, but clients want effective seminars and books that simplify matters so the layman can easily understand them and quickly apply them. This is why some consultants and authors take shortcuts, i.e. they take refuge in monosystemic approaches and undifferentiated guidelines. These are easy to teach and easy to learn, and since they are usually not 100% wrong, they may achieve something. It is sad to note that a number of these methods and teach-yourself books are successful not in spite of being wrong but because they are wrong. It is the ungrateful task of philosophers and linguists to keep pointing out why theories behind the training methods are cost-effective and essential for guaranteeing the reliability of results.

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