

Is it Time to Replace Skill With Style? A Case for Studying Communication Style

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Abstract - Three terms that scholars from Interpersonal Communication would be well-aware of are communication skills, communication competence, and communication style. Of the three streams, communication style seems inadequately studied and finds itself losing the scholarly attention. While there is very little recent literature in this stream, it looks promising to renew the research interest and contribute to building theory. This paper presents introductory literature on what is communication style, makes qualitative elaborations for scholar search results, and goes on to build a case for active study in this area. It was a surprising finding that this construct beats the other two in generational development, while on the contrary it finds itself diminishing.

Keywords: Communication Style, Communication Skill, Communication Competence, Interpersonal Communication, Case for Study, Literature Review

I. INTRODUCTION

Ask a job seeker who sat for multiple interviews without much success, his reason for failure. The answer is more common than it should be, and perhaps more wrong than right: lack of communication skill. In the daily usage, the meaning of communication skill is trivialized to treating communication as a trainable motor skill. That means nothing more than understanding communication as mere information exchange. This is not just with the case of a losing job seeker, but with various others in diverse facets of life. The meaning of what communication is and should be is seldom discussed, while the need for communication skills is discoursed more frequently. That perhaps makes the state of life worse, since the demands on the right kind of communication is increasing, without really any knowledge of what right communication is. An internet search on Google Scholar for 'Communication Skill' and 'Communication Skills' gave out a whopping 7, 14, 300 articles (browsed on 17th June, 2011). On application of just one constraint, that is to remove all articles with 'training', the result comes down drastically to less than a lakh; a drop of more than 86%. This is a reason for retrospection! And even more, a justification to the claim that the meaning of communication today is trivialized to a trainable motor skill. This is not to claim that training does not help one improve one's communication, but only to indicate that what goes on

under the umbrella of communication skill has proved less useful than it should be, for the magnitude of work that went into it.

II. NEED FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

In an interactional setting, if one thought skill matters most, then perhaps it is time to consider an alternative to 'skill'. In the arena of Interpersonal Communication, scholars have been working on two other constructs which could prove better: communication competence and communication style. If one had to track the genesis of these constructs in the contemporary literature, communication skill came at around 1940s, while communication style came in late 1950s, and communication competence in late 1960s. So on one hand, it is not surprising that the most commonly used construct is 'communication skill', for it has existed at least a generation longer than 'communication style'. But what is surprising is that the pursuit of research in 'communication competence' exceeds the effort that goes into 'communication style'. While this is not to indicate a bias towards the study of 'communication style', there was a need for finding the reasons why it was being subsided and if they were reasons enough.

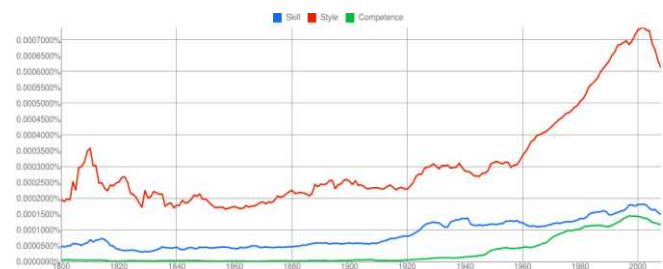


Fig.1 Google Books Ngram

The above chart is a Google Books Ngram. It displays how frequently a set of words have been used in all books ever published in a certain time frame. This graph here shows the frequency of use of the words skill, style, and competence, in books published between 1800 and 2011. It is evident that 'style' is the most used word over skill and competence. This does not allow the author to infer that 'style' is what is being studied most, but definitely allows to express that 'style' is what most general audience reads and refers to.

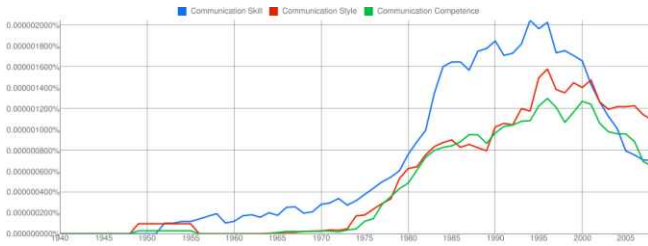


Fig.2 Tracks the usage of words communication skill

This is another Ngram that tracks the usage of words communication skill, communication style, and communication competence. While the graph here shows the elevated use of communication skill between 1940 and 2000, there is a steady progress that communication style and communication competence made from mid 1960s. As on date, Communication style is what is most frequently used in books getting published while communication skill and communication competence are on a steep decline. However, it is also a matter of concern that all three constructs are showing different degrees of decline, meaning that not sufficient focus is being given to them, or at least not as much as it was a decade ago. This graph also shows that the study of 'communication style' fits well within the current trend of what the general audience is reading and referring to.

There is one problem with the use of Google Ngram that it is not entirely scholarly. Therefore, the case that Google Ngram makes for the study of communication style is only suggestive but not confirmative. One might also pose a question that if there is more happening already in this area, then why is there a case being made up for more of its study. The point is that Google Ngrams is only an indication of how frequently authors use these terms in all published books. This in no way indicates the amount of scholarly work that goes in this area. But one conclusion that a Ngram should support strongly is a construct's fit with the trend.

III. WHERE THE SCHOLARLY EFFORTS ARE

To address this issue, the author reverted to another Google technology, custom made for scholars, Google Scholar. Google Scholar is a platform that enables scholars across the globe to search for works and provides links where the article may be accessed. Though full-access is not possible through Google Scholar, since full-access comes at the discretion of the publisher, it is useful in sourcing the abstracts more often than not. However, in this case, the author chose to use Google Scholar to track down the generational development of these constructs in terms of the number of works directly addressing the construct, and number of works that may have at least referred to these constructs.

TABLE I SEARCH WITH CONDITION: ALL IN TITLE

Time Period Criteria used in Search / Search String	Communication Style	Communicator Style	Communication Competence	Communicator Competence	Communication Skills
1951-1960	2	0	0	0	40
1961-1970	4	0	2	1	111
1971-1980	57	30	52	0	755
1981-1990	117	102	212	4	1160
1991-2000	143	57	279	2	1710
2001-2011 (10th May)	185	20	414	3	2580
Total	508	209	959	10	6356

It is reasonable to assume that if the construct appears in the title of a publication, then it must be in direct reference to the construct. Thus Table I may be treated as indicative of the number of publications in each construct in the decade mentioned in the first column. Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that if the construct appears in a publication anywhere, then it must have been used making a reference to the central theme of the paper. Hence, Table II may be treated as indicative of the number of publications in which these constructs are either directly dealt with or are made use of to support, elaborate, or contradict the central theme.

To draw a comparison between communication style and communication competence, it is paradoxical that communication style is referred more (21563 references), but pursued less (508 publications), while communication competence is pursued more than communication style (959 publications) but referred less (10467 references). To conclude that communication competence has the potential to invade the virgin areas of this discipline may be premature, since the number of times its works are referred is less than 50% to that of the number of times communication style is referred. Yet at

TABLE II SEARCH WITH NO CONSTRAINT

Time Period Criteria used in Search / Search String	Communication Style	Communicator Style	Communication Competence	Communicator Competence	Communication Skills (One Constraint: Exclude 'training')
1951-1960	6	0	2	0	241
1961-1970	45	3	26	2	948
1971-1980	382	64	314	5	4640
1981-1990	1300	388	995	42	8560
1991-2000	4630	418	2180	64	15000
2001-2011 (10th May)	15200	594	6950	130	19800
Total	21563	1467	10467	243	49189

the same time, one cannot promise that communication style might have the potential to do so, because it dealt with much lesser times by much smaller community. These numbers may not allow a hard conclusion about the strength of the stream of research or suggest a stream as priority. But these numbers allow to strongly denying the criticism that communication competence has encompassed communication style, a criticism one of the reputed scholars made in an email communication with the author.

Even in comparison with communication skill, communication style definitely made a competitive progress albeit it came a generation after. For evidence, look at Table II, and find the number of papers that refer to the construct in

communication style in the decade 2001 to 2011, 6th generation for this construct (15200 references), and compare that with the number of papers that cite communication skill in its 6th generation, that is the decade 1991 to 2000 (15000 references). There is a hope thus that communication style too would pick up.

IV. THE SCHOLARLY CASE

While the Ngrams and Tables made a case for promoting the study in communication style, it may not be sufficient until the construct itself shows promise for theory development. The author thus chose to scan the literature in the field and find suitable reasons that might encourage research in this area.

TABLE III SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION

Duration (Including)	# Works in Sample	# Total Works	Sample as % of Total
1971-1980	31	87	35.63
1981-1990	59	219	26.94
1991-2000	54	200	27.00
2001-May, 2011	79	205	38.54

Of all the published works in the area of communication style including journal publications, conference proceedings, and thesis works, the author could source the abstracts of a few of them which served as a sample for the study. Details of the sample are given in Table III. Total sample as a percentage of total works published in this area is 31.36%. These abstracts were further content analyzed to seek, sort and filter a list of variables that are studied in conjunction with communication style. A total of 187 variables were identified, sorted and

filtered based on their conceptual closeness. A final list of 37 variables was taken out since they were different from one another making a reasonably mutually exclusive representation of all variables studied together with communication style. Some of these variables may still appear similar the ones already in the list, and that was allowed because of the considerable magnitude of research done around those variables. These variables are listed here in Table IV.

TABLE IV VARIABLES STUDIED WITH COMMUNICATION STYLE

Age	Education	Nature of Message	Satisfaction
Anxiety	Effectiveness	Perceived Competence	Self-Esteem
Approachability	Environment	Perceived Control	Sex
Attention	Expectations	Perceived Outcomes	Stereotypes
Attraction	Experience	Performance	Training
Commitment	Intelligence	Personality	Trust
Communion	Knowledge	Power Orientation	Values
Compliance	Learning	Professional Background	
Credibility	Medium of Communication	Reputation	
Culture	Motives	Role	

V. A BIOLOGICAL CASE FOR THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION STYLE

Social and scholarly reasons aplenty make a sufficient case for the study of communication style. It may still be wise to look into reasons that might have evolutionary significance related to it. Joseph Cappella (1991) was the first in the field of communication to have made such an observation. He reported that most of the observations/phenomena in the field of communication have been explained by social and psychological means. Further, he suggested that it may be unwise to ignore the biological origins of human behaviour if a scholar is to understand any construct comprehensively. In his work, he stated a few reasons why a scholar should consider studying biological origins of communication: first, that individuals are biological organisms and that their behaviour at least in part is explained by their biological constitution a debate similar to nature-nurture in personality theories; second, focus on culture and socialization in understanding human communication is an effort in understanding differences, whether they be individual differences, gender differences, status differences etc, however, there is also a need to look at the similarities which exist across cultures, like Ekman's work on Cross-cultural uniformity in the display and interpretation of facial emotions; third, the search for biological origins for a set of phenomenon, if successful can explain the roots that are fundamental to human behaviour that is not merely an artifact of socialization.

Capella's work was applicable to all communication related constructs in general. There are two ways in which biological significance of any construct is established: first, by studying twins to identify similarities and differences, and second, to study those components of brain that lead to a specific behaviour studies which broadly constitutes

themselves under cognitive sciences. There are two landmark studies in this dimension that are related to communication style in specific.

Horvath (1995) tried to identify if communication style could be explained as a consequence of biological constitution by studying the styles of identical and fraternal twins. Identical twins carry same genetic structure, whereas fraternal twins tend to have different genetic structures. If the communication style of identical twins is more similar than it is in the fraternal twins, then one has to attribute that similarity to the gene structure carried assuming that their socialization is comparable and similar. His observations confirmed that genes do have an effect on communication style; that is, it can be hereditary too. Further, his study correlated temperament and communication styles. Other variables as per his study that could be hereditary include sociability, activity, fearfulness, distress, anger, openness, relaxed, communicator image. His study clearly indicates that communication style has a biological explanation.

Later, Bodary & Miller (2000) have studied if communication style could be explained by the differences in brain structures. That rationale for their study was that communication, of any kind, has two dimensions that are pointed out extensively in literature: content and relational dimensions. The works of Stacks & Anderson (1989) by then have already reached a conclusion that the left hemisphere contributes to the content dimension and the right hemisphere contributes to the relational dimension. As a part of the methodology, this study classified male and female participants into standard dominant and anomalous dominant, based on variables such as handedness, familial sinistrality, and hemispheric laterality. Standard dominant participants were those who were not diagnosed with any learning disorder, and were right-handed, where as anomalous dominant participants were those who were either diagnosed with an

immune or learning disorder such as dyslexia, stuttering, and asthma among others, and were left-handed. Communication style preferences of standard dominant males and anomalous dominant males were different, and so it was for the female participants too. Anomalous dominant males reported higher friendly, impression-leaving, animated, open, and communicator image style scores. Standard dominant males had the highest relaxed style scores. These results again confirm the hypothesis that communication style has a biological explanation to it.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the author tried to present the state of research around communication style, explaining the reasons why it needs more attention, perhaps more than what is given to communication competence or communication skill. With evidence, the paper shows that communication style has evolutionary significance in that the construct could be explained based on the biology of human beings, and also that communication style is the construct that is more read and written about in the general community. A decadal analysis of all the three constructs has been presented. And from an extensive literature review, a list of variables that are commonly studied with communication style is presented. In one sense, this paper could serve as a reference point for the scholars intending to work in this area further.

Unlike these more researched constructs, communication style may have just had a nominal theoretical foundation, but the initial efforts showed directions in which theory can be developed. The first three generations of research in this area grew horizontally with changes in the study setting. And, though the last couple of decades saw a dip in research interest in this area, few recent works have retriggered an enthusiasm that this construct needed much. For example, deVries *et al* (2009) came up using a lexical method for the study of communication styles, and Waldherr and Muck (2011) proposed that the study of communication style may have the theories of personality as a framework to support theory development. Dianne, Barbara & Basma (2005) have already expressed a surprise at how little has been done in this area and elaborated the need for study in this discipline.

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