

# Interaction

*W. Russell Neuman*

*University of Michigan*

The term *interaction* is used in diverse social-scientific as well as natural-scientific fields of inquiry to identify a pattern of reciprocal influence or exchange among two or more entities. In physics, scientists have identified such fundamental mechanisms as gravity and magnetism by which particles exert mutual influence on one another. In communication studies and textbooks, perhaps surprisingly, the term is found rather

infrequently. While the core idea of interaction is very close to the concept of communication, a terminology of interaction tends to suggest a particular set of preferred epistemologies, methodologies, and analytical objects in communication research.

### INTERACTION AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Interaction in communication scholarship most often signals a counterpoint to what is still widely perceived as a dominant one-way transmission model of communication effects, typically associated with such early researchers as → Harold D. Lasswell and Claude Shannon. In comparison, → cultural studies scholars, for instance, frequently emphasize the way in which audience members interact with – actively interpret and appropriate – the symbols and ideas that are prevalent in popular culture, rather than simply being influenced by them (→ Interactivity in Reception).

The understanding of interpretation as interaction within communication theory resonates with a much older recognition in philosophy, namely, that symbolic exchange among humans invariably involves a great deal of *ambiguity*. As John Locke put it in introducing a modern conception of human communication, “Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them . . . Every man has so inviolable a Liberty, to make Words stand for what Ideas he pleases, that no one hath the Power to make others have the same Ideas in their minds that he has” (quoted in Peters 1999, 84). The analytical attention to ambiguity has been elaborated and systematized, first, in semiotic approaches to communication study (→ Semiotics), exploring the contextualized and fragile character of the semantic meaning that is established in the interaction between signs and interpreters (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993). Second, an interactive perspective is at the forefront of hermeneutic epistemology, which has been drawn into communication research from literary theory and criticism (→ Hermeneutics). Hermeneutic and interpretive terminologies have served to organize reviews of the field of communication theory by, for example, Anderson (1996).

The idea of interaction has also influenced communication research at a social-systemic level. Because interaction is critical to the frameworks of some of the most distinguished social and cultural theorists, especially those with an interest in the cultural reproduction of inequality, several of these have developed neologisms to capture the specific role of interaction processes in their theory-building. In each case, however, the motivation has been to reject a simple one-way causality and to acknowledge a multi-directional behavioral phenomenon. Anthony Giddens (1984), for one, with his influential notion of *structuration*, emphasized what he calls a duality of structure. Society and culture, accordingly, do not simplistically determine individual perception or behavior. But, if cultural traditions resonate with a freely initiated human agency, they function to reproduce the social structure, which survives and evolves in interaction with successive generations of human actors. Jensen (1995) summarized this complex idea in noting that human agency and social structure are enabling conditions for each other. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1991) reflexive sociology extended the concept of *habitus* from anthropology to contemporary social theory in an effort to capture the subtle

interaction of social subjects' perceptions and actions in concrete contexts. And Niklas Luhmann (1995) adapted the concept of *autopoiesis* from cybernetics to suggest how the culturally significant selections that are made by individuals out of a wide variety of phenomena in their environment gives a particular social structure its defining character.

## INTERACTION AS DIALOGUE

When communication scholars do refer to interaction, it is frequently in the tradition studying → interpersonal communication, i.e., the micro-analysis of routinized, contextualized, and usually dyadic exchanges between individuals (→ Language and Social Interaction). Everett Rogers (1973) noted that there is a gaping cultural divide between interpersonal and mass communication scholarship, suggesting that perhaps both areas are less well off as a result.

In the tradition of interpersonal communication, researchers typically draw on models such as Giles et al.'s (1991) → communication accommodation theory, which tracks how individuals continuously adjust their speed and style of speaking as well as associated physical postures in conversation as a response to others. Also influential has been Burgoon et al.'s (1995) → interaction adaptation theory, which notes how a speaker may either mirror or compensate for the behaviors of other speakers.

In the 1950s, Gregory Bateson initiated what was to become known as the Palo Alto School, an unusually far-reaching, interdisciplinary group of medical and social researchers. The aim was to develop an elaborate theory of communication as interaction, drawing on cybernetics, systems theory, cultural anthropology, and psychiatry. Its influence is still felt in studies of the psychology of communication and in linguistics.

## SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

A specific position, in the study of communication as well as other research fields, is the symbolic interactionist perspective (→ Symbolic Interaction). The term was coined and popularized by sociologist Herbert Blumer as a tribute to the insights of his mentor, George Herbert Mead. Mead's *Mind, self, and society* (1934) was a highly influential, philosophically grounded book which inspired a generation of social scientists at the University of Chicago and elsewhere. But it was Blumer's essays on methods and his critique of deterministic behaviorism that concretely affected the practice of research. The perspective continues to inform a small but vigorous community of researchers with several journals, perhaps most closely associated with sociology, even if it carries a family resemblance with the understanding of communication as a multidirectional process.

Further, → Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology emphasized the micro-analysis of situated human interaction. Although Goffman did not himself use the term "symbolic interaction," his notion of frame analysis continues to influence students of communication who practice observational research of interaction in its social and cultural frames or contexts. Likewise, → ethnomethodology covers a related tradition of research that emphasizes the importance of examining how people rely on mundane "methods" to accomplish communication in everyday contexts.

## STATISTICAL INTERACTION

Statistical interaction refers to a set of research techniques that, except for the terminology of interaction, has been entirely independent of the theoretical and analytical traditions noted above. In fact, these techniques enter into the kind of quantitative analyses of communication effects that, from an interactionist perspective, would typically be characterized as insensitive to the complexity of how humans negotiate meaning with each other and within their environment. Still, statistical interaction may in time provide one methodological bridge between two currently separate scholarly worlds.

Statistical interaction refers to a phenomenon in which the value of a third variable appears to influence the relationship between two other variables. To exemplify, if it is evident that young children are likely to purchase a particular product in response to repeated exposure to an advertisement, while older children are not, then age would be identified as an “interactive variable” modifying the apparent impact of the advertisement.

A reliance on statistical interaction could be considered in the spirit of an interactionist perspective. Because more sophisticated structural models address issues of nonlinearity, they, in turn, become more contextually sensitive. Asking the research question – under what conditions do any observed patterns of correlation appear to hold – it becomes possible to specify more of the constituents of human communication, including those constituents of meaningful interaction that do not necessarily lend themselves to verbalization or explication by participants (→ Statistics, Explanatory).

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERACTIVITY

The systematic study of how humans interact through the exchange of symbols and reciprocal interpretation predates modern scholarship by centuries – from classical rhetoric to the modern conception of communication by Locke and others. Yet, as noted, the term *interaction* appears only irregularly in current communication scholarship. That seems likely to change in the decades ahead, as new interactive technologies of mediated communication, including the Internet, digital information retrieval and control systems, and video games, grow and spread (→ Human–Computer Interaction; Interactivity, Concept of). As the traditional divide between the micro-level analysis of dialogic human conversation and the macro-level study of mass-mediated technologies in the public sphere increasingly collapses or is reconfigured, interaction may serve as a common denominator for what people do with various types of media.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Communication Accommodation Theory ▶ Cultural Studies ▶ Dialogic Perspectives ▶ Ethnomethodology ▶ Goffman, Erving ▶ Hermeneutics ▶ Human–Computer Interaction ▶ Interaction Adaptation Theory ▶ Interactivity, Concept of ▶ Interactivity in Reception ▶ Interpersonal Communication ▶ Language and Social Interaction ▶ Lasswell, Harold D. ▶ Reciprocity and Compensation in Interaction ▶ Semiotics ▶ Statistics, Explanatory ▶ Structural Equation ▶ Symbolic Interaction

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