

Coordinated management of meaning essay sample

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CMM Theory Explanation Since the late 1970's, a communication theory, Coordinated Management of Meaning, has been developing. W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen were the two people responsible. Their purpose was to explain that CMM is a rules based approach to bring understanding and reality to an interaction. They illustrated that in order to understand communication we had to look at it from the participant's point of view (Jensen, 2000). I have applied the concept of CMM Theory to the movie "Meet the Parents" to achieve a better understanding and illustrate the different aspects of this theory.

In an interaction, CMM relies on coherence, coordination and mystery (Griffin, 1997). These steps allow us to further understand how we create realities out of our interactions. The first step in conversation is coherence.

Coherence describes how meaning is achieved in an interaction. When entering a conversation we have certain expectations. We look to the hierarchy of meaning to make sense of the interaction. We begin with content (Griffin, 1997).

The content is basically the raw data or the words. For example, we may say, "You are a geek." The actual words in that phrase are the content. Although we know what each word means we still do not know how we are going to interpret the statement. In order to construct meaning out of these words we go to the next level, speech act (Wood, 2000).

Speech acts are the context of the content. This is how we decide how to interpret what is being said to us. For example, if you and your friend are

joking around and he says, " You are a geek," while laughing, you are most likely to interpret that as being friendly. On the other hand, if a bully at school says the same thing to you while snickering, you are most likely to interpret it another way. The way that you interpret the content and speech acts also depends on the episode.

The episode is the next level in the hierarchy of meaning. An episode is a recurring routine of interaction that is structured by rules and boundaries. For example, you may tell your father to shut-up when you are joking around about something that is embarrassing, however, it is not acceptable to tell your father to shut-up during an argument or in a more serious setting. These episodes help us to determine the rules or limitations of the interaction and what is said within the interaction.

The fourth level in the hierarchy is relationships. This helps us to determine how we are supposed to act in a particular interaction with someone due to prior experiences. In other words, it shows us who we are to each other. For example, it may be acceptable to call one person a geek but not another. This is because it is understood within the one relationship that you are simply just exchanging friendly insults.

An autobiography, or life script, is how you feel about yourself. This not only shapes how you look at yourself, but how you look at others. The autobiography level is important because it influences the way that you communicate with others and, in turn, how people communicate with you. For example, you are going to be more comfortable in a relationship and

episode that is more consistent with yourself. If you are outgoing, ambitious and helpful, you are going to be more comfortable in an episode that allows you to exercise these speech acts.

The final level in the hierarchy of meaning is cultural patterns. These are understandings of speech acts, episodes, relationships and autobiographies that are shared by particular social groups or societies (Wood, 2000). This simply means that something that is said within one group may be interpreted as something different within another group. For example, when a loved one of an Italian family dies it is appropriate to express their grief and dress in black. However, in another culture this expression may be interpreted as something completely different (Jensen, 2000).

Not only do we follow this hierarchy, but we also have rules to help connect these levels. These rules help to make successful interactions and also make logic of them. The first rule is the constitutive rule. We use constitutive rules to interpret behavior and to make sense out of our interactions. In order to have a complimentary relationship with someone you must establish what the constitutive rules are. For example, in a relationship the husband may be very passive and tries to avoid conflict. He feels that by not arguing and going with the flow he is showing his wife that he cares about her and loves her. On the other hand, the wife feels that her husband does not care about their relationship because he never has anything to say and does not try to resolve their conflicts.

The other type of rules is called regulative rules. These rules tell us when it is appropriate, and when it is not to say or do something. For example, it is appropriate to talk back to your friends but it is not appropriate to talk back to a teacher. Another example is that it is appropriate for a child to leave the table after asking to be excused, but it is not appropriate to just get up and walk away (Jensen, 2000).

With rules comes the concept of logical force. This is the felt obligation to act. When put into a particular episode we may feel compelled to act a certain way according to regulative rules. For example, when sitting in church you are quiet and very still but you are not paying attention. You follow mass by sitting, standing and kneeling when everyone else does but your mind is somewhere else. You go along with the routine that everyone else is following because that is what is expected and appropriate in that situation. Another example of logical force may be the way that we act when we want something. For example, you usually get up from the dinner table after you eat and go watch television. Now that you want to borrow the car you decide to stay and help wash the dishes. The reason that we do this is because we feel that acting this way at this particular time would be logical to get what we want (Greenberg, 1991).

The second step in conversation is coordination. Each individual has a separate set of rules that they follow. These rules are a way of coinciding with someone else. By using regulative rules we are guiding our actions so that we are better able to coincide with the other person. It is emphasized through coordination that although we may have different views, morals

and beliefs, it does not make someone else's wrong. In other words, it is still possible to reach mutual ground.

To further understand how we meet mutual ground we can look at reflexivity. Within reflexivity there are two types of loops, strange loops and charmed loops. In strange loops, two levels in the hierarchy of meaning cannot exchange positions without changing meaning. This is what causes problems because the meanings are being misunderstood. The other loops, charmed loops, are non-problematic. The meanings in the episode are compatible even though they are in different contexts (Greenberg, 1991).

Finally, the third step is mystery. These are the stories or feelings that are unexpressed and unexplainable. This directly affects the way that we interact and form our social environment (Griffin, 1997).

Although CMM is very mapped out there, is still an unclear meaning. This is a rules based theory, but the rules differ in meaning. The rules of this theory are also too ambiguous (Wood, 2000). In other words, two theorists will have two interpretations of the rules of the same theory. There have not been any rules developed for exceptions or violations of this theory, which makes it hard to analyze the creative aspects. Lastly, the scope of this theory is too broad. The theory does not allow us to look at more specific communication activities but more at the whole picture (Wood, 2000). Application I have chosen to apply CMM Theory to the movie " Meet the Parents" for a few reasons. " Meet the Parents" has many opportunities to illustrate the process of going through the hierarchy of meaning. It also contains examples of rules

that help us to determine how to act in particular situations. Finally it gives me the opportunity to discuss how CMM applies to relationships in everyday interactions.

Ben Stiller is meeting De Niro for the first time. They are already in an awkward position because they have not yet met. Before being introduced to De Niro, Stiller is told that De Niro looks at smoking as a sign of weakness. Logical force is demonstrated when Stiller decides that it would be inappropriate for him to smoke in this episode. His feeling of awkwardness and meeting the parents for the first time, can help to be understood by the concept of coherence. Both of these people have certain expectations of the meeting because of prior experiences. Stiller is thinking that he is going to meet a 'normal' family and is trying to make a good impression. According to his regulative rules he has an idea of how to act in the situation. He is very polite and thinks that he knows what to say and when to say it. Through constitutive rules he can make meaning out of this interaction. These constitutive rules are basically forming an environment. De Niro is being very inquisitive and not very friendly. This helps to determine that this is not an environment that Stiller can feel comfortable in.

When Stiller visits his girlfriend's ex's house, constitutive rules paint a different image than he had in mind. While browsing through the house he notices pictures of both his girlfriend and her ex. Although he has been reassured that there is nothing between them anymore, he becomes insecure because of the nature of these pictures. While his girlfriend looks at them as being a sign of friendship, Stiller interprets them as much more. He

thinks that these pictures show that the relationship is not over or has a possibility of being restored.

Another scene that comes to mind is when De Niro and Stiller are riding to the store together. "Puff the Magic Dragon" is playing on the radio. This song obviously has flexible meanings. Stiller makes an attempt at conversation by talking about the hidden meaning in the song. De Niro interprets the speech act as something different, which in turn makes the situation increasingly uncomfortable for Stiller.

Mystery, the final concept of CMM, is what both De Niro and Stiller are experiencing. Neither one of them has any idea what the other one is thinking. Stiller does not know what De Niro's first impression of him is or how this trip is going to end up. Through this mystery, they are trying to make sense of what the other is trying to convey through the conversation.

Through our everyday interactions we can apply CMM Theory. We take the raw data or the words and through speech acts, make meaning out of them. We see this in "Meet the Parents" in every conversation. Unfortunately, the way that they interpret these speech acts is very distorted. This may be because of the particular episodes that they are in. Although Stiller feels that he is in an episode that is familiar, he finds that he is not. The different culture patterns of both Stiller and De Niro help to change their relationship throughout the movie.

Towards the end of the movie, Stiller is taking a plane back home. While being on the plane he yells, "It's not like I have a bomb!" While he meant it

to mean one thing, it was taken out of his context and taken more seriously. The speech act was unacceptable because of the episode that he was in. As a result, what he said was taken out of context and interpreted in a more severe way than was intended.

Coordinated Management of Meaning is useful when examining interactions. It helps us to understand communication from the participant's point of view and not just the observer's point of view. It breaks down interactions and gives us rules so that we can better understand the communication that we engage in with others.