

Place is the code

Description

default watermark

In cryptographic communication, a sender has a message in mind then converts that into a coded signal. The sender dispatches the signal through a communication channel and it is picked up by a recipient who decodes the message. The coding and decoding algorithms at either end of the channel select from an array of alternative meanings and combinations of meanings. Thatâ??s a very basic model of how cryptography operates.

The decoding process is something like the method by which closed caption software translates speech to text, as a search through a lattice of probabilities, i.e. a *selection* from a raft of possible translations. See post: Speech to text.

In their book *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Shannon and Weaver adopt this process as a model of how language operates in general, including communication between human beings.

Hereâ??s a description of their model by linguist Michael Reddy. As it happens, Reddy is highly critical of the model.

> â??The whole point of the system is that the alternatives themselves are not mobile, and cannot be sent, whereas the energy patterns, the â??signalsâ?? are mobile. If all goes well, the signals, when they arrive at the receiving end, are used to duplicate the original selection process and recreate the message. That is, using the relationships of the code and the copy of the original set of alternatives, the receiving end can make the same selections that were made earlier on the transmitting end when the message was generatedâ?• (303).

Whatâ??s wrong with the containment metaphor

Reddy has several objections to Shannon and Weaverâ??s model of communication. One is that it implies the signals passed from sender to receiver have â??content.â?• He calls this the â??container metaphorâ?• or the â??conduit metaphor.â?• The sender packs meaning into signals that are eventually unpacked by the receiver. That model is reinforced by common metaphors we use as we talk about communication: e.g. â??please put your ideas into words.â?•

Reddy argues convincingly against this *containment metaphor* applied to language in general. Echoing a basic tenet of Pragmatism (Peirce), Reddy states: â??Signals do something. They cannot contain anythingâ?• (306). Without the presence of human and social interpretive agents at either end of the channel all that passes along are arbitrary patterns. For Reddy, sentences, texts and the whole semiotic apparatus of symbols, signals and patterns are *tools* in the communication, not containers. Reddy replaces the conduit metaphor with the *tools metaphor.*

Signals as tools

A second corollary of Reddyâ??s objection is that in so far as we believe in a sender-receiver model, the coding and decoding apparatus at either end of the communication channel is also part of what gets communicated. We learn the code as we communicate. Any communication takes place within a context of multiple signals across many communication events. Thatâ??s how language competence is acquired. Like the signal that passes through the communication channel the coding and decoding apparatuses are also mobile.

default watermark

Itâ??s reasonable to presume that the patterns in a signal include tools for their interpretation. I like the idea that the code is part of the message, that communication events include the means of their interpretation. That approach assumes any particular message lies within the much wider context of communicative practices that also contribute to the coding-decoding process. Communication is a commerce in tools for enabling action, i.e. they are *performative*.

Place as tool shed

Tools that are well designed make clear how they are to be used. Thatâ??s the basic idea that objects have *affordances*. Well designed door handles signal to us by their shape, materials, positioning, etc whether they are to be pushed, pulled or turned.

Iâ??ve been using the term â??codeâ?• fairly loosely. If I now take â??codeâ?• to mean something like â??access codeâ?• or â??key codeâ?• then itâ??s tempting to think of circumstances in which the code to unlock a secret message is *part of* the message, and of the messageâ??s context.

Moving on to space and place â?¦ The code that â??unlocksâ?• the secrets of a place are in the place. Thatâ??s a world imbued with evidence and clues. To avoid over-reliance on the conduit metaphor I should say that a place has tools, objects and affordances that enable us to do things, which is to say that enable us to *understand*. See posts: Interpretation by design, On being a detective, Hunch, symptom, clue and Remaking the city.



default watermark

Bibliography

- Austin, John. 1966. *How to do Things with Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Gibson, James J. 1950. *The Perception of the Visual World*. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press
- Hillier, Bill. 2007. *Space is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture*. London: Space Syntax, UCL
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1968. *The Medium is the Massage (long playing record)*. CS 9501, CL2701: Columbia Records
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1994. *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Reddy, Michael. 1979. The conduit metaphor: A case of frame conflict in our language about language. In Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*: 284-324. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shannon, Claude E., and William Weaver. 1963. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana, Ill.: The University of Illinois Press

Note

- On the conflation of code and message Iâ??m reminded of Marshall McLuhanâ??s catch phrase, â??The medium is the message.â?•

Category

1. Metaphor

Tags

1. communication
2. cryptography
3. place
4. semiotics

Date Created
December 5, 2020
Author
rcoyne99

default watermark