

## Communication through Structured Significations at Public Places

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### Abstract

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Communication is a means to convey the intended feeling, idea or thought etc. through various ways. It is not only in the form of written treatises or verbal interaction like speech, monologue, dialogue, song etc. but more than that. Silence is also a way of communication through eyes, facial expressions, movements of the hands and gestures. Sign and symbol at public places represent the idea on things and this idea is communicated to the public; one's collectively shared universal or cultural experiences making the binary of thoughts in his mind help in such communication. Such communication takes place on the basis of one's own semiotics of finding analogy or difference to the present sign to decipher the meaning therein. The communication through signs like pictograms and symbols is cognitive process having multi-layered structures; we not only try to decipher the fixed meaning but associate one sign to other similar signs to arrive at the logic difference. Finding the image of woman on toilet door one tends to apply the logic that this is the image of '**Not Man**' and he makes the right choice. Sign of '**No Horn Please**' showing the picture of a trumpet can remind us the ideas and images of musical instruments like flute, drums, saxophone etc. Coming across with the '**No Smoking**' message the poetics of smoking having some connotations also starts taking place in the mind apart from its desired meaning of prohibition of smoking. Ironically the idea of *No Smoking* brings in mind the idea of *Smoking* and the resultant images of cigarettes, biris and even that of hookah. In other words the signs and symbols at public places imply the complicated cognitive process in our mind; process of such communication involves the use of set structural binaries we collectively share in our mind.

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The concept of communication cannot be restricted to mere written treatises or verbal communication like speech, monologue, dialogue, song etc. Rather communication permeates the very essence of life; it is in many forms and everywhere. Besides, it is not the phenomenon limited to human world only as other creatures like animals also communicate through certain gestures, movements, sounds and chemicals. Reptiles carry out their communication by spitting or leaving special type of chemicals. Generally the phenomenon of communication is narrowly associated with verbal or written communication but it is more than that. Human perception serve as the means of communication as when one perceives something the associated or dissociated ideas come in his mind and communication with no verbal attempt takes place. Any ideogram, sign, symbol, text, word or phrase, figure etc. stands as signifying something and that signified reality leads to silent communication in one's mind. However this process does involve the language but within the mind as analyzed by Krishna Mohan and Meera Banerji, " Though there are number of means of communication, language is the most widely used instrument. Man communicates meaning through sophisticated system of symbols" (Mohan & Banerji, 1990. Pp. 03).

In order to critically delve deep into the term of communication and structural signification it is imperative to take the very concept of '*communication*' into critical evaluation first. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the term as ---the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information. Plainly speaking, communication is a tool or means to convey the intended feeling, idea or thought etc. through various ways and thus meaning is derived from it. But there is no inherent or set connection between communicated thought and the ascribed meaning. The usage of that communication in the past experience helps convey and receive or understand the meaning. The definition of the term '*communication*' goes, as given at Online Communication Studies blog, "Communication is the act of conveying information for the purpose of creating a shared understanding. It's something that humans do every day" (Online Communication Studies Blog, 2013).

Etymologically speaking the term '*communication*' has efflorescence in Latin word '*communis*' which denotes "to share," and includes verbal, non-verbal and electronic means of human interaction.

Nonetheless, the phenomena of communication cannot be narrowed down to the fact of its dependence on language and speech since the silence itself is a great way of communication among humans as well as animals. The expressions on face, actions of moving of hands in different ways etc. tell of the mind contents. Prominent thinkers like Herold Pinter have very subtly but dexterously endeavored to establish the idea and value of silent communication over verbal communication in their celebrated literary works. In fact, silent communication has its own type of eloquence which is absent in verbal one. Sometimes the communication from the reserved zones of heart cannot be given the shape of appropriate words and thus can only be taken into comprehension through all the more expressive means i. e. eyes.

To put it through structuralist way, any form of communication results in the mind of the listener or reader, into forming a set of signification or codes associated to that said idea. Any word or utterance is a signifier of many similar signified words or utterances teeming in the mind of perceiver, reader or listener to be associated with the signifier. Communication is made possible with the help of relational combination and contrast between the said words (signifier) and the associated words in mind (signified). The cognitive process of communication often works on the collectively held binary like—white/black, good/bad, masculine/feminine, small/big and so on. Something *good* is communicated since it is not *bad* as per the universally set standards.

No word or utterance has its meaning in isolation; but it can be communicated through its difference from other words in the organizational chain in our mind. Thus 'nip' is communicated as 'nip' only by virtue of its difference from 'dip' or 'hip.' So it is our understanding of set structures in human languages that enables the communication take place. Thus the written instruction on public place 'Keep Left' signifies what is not 'Left' i.e. 'Right'. This is the binary of opposite words *left/right* in the mind of layman that becomes functional at the time of communication. The opinion of Krishna Mohan and Meera Banerji deserves citing again to substantiate the role codification in of the phenomenal reality for successful communication, "Another aspect of communication is the deployment of a code consisting of arbitrarily evolved symbols and the determination of the appropriateness of their use in given situation, leading to the emergence of diverse communication patterns" (Mohan & Banerji, 1990. pp. 04).

Going by this definition it can be brought at home that we codify the language, sound, sign etc. on the basis of the structures of idea in our mind and the meaning is determined by the situations.

Chomskyan concept of **Surface Structure and Deep Structure** holds the key to get into the very core the process of communication in various forms. What we see on the face of it is the *surface structure* while the inherent or associated meaning that is controlled by the *deep structure*, is the primary and elementary in that communication. The *surface structure* in any communication may vary yet carries the same essential meaning. The surface structure at any public wash room, toilet or in a train toilet may be either like-- '**Do Not Waste Water**' or '**Do Not Leave the Tap Running**'. These two sentences may be different syntactically viz. on surface; yet they are semantically same as the deep structure having the meaning of *proper utility of water* controls them and thus desired communication takes place. In the same way two surface structures may have same form but deep in meaning they have different communications. For example, '**Do Not Spit Here**' and '**Do Not Sit Here**' have the same structure but have different meanings.

While the communication through messages or texts on instruction boards, cautions, signs boards etc. at public places is set to convey the stipulated message to the public in general to abide by. Nevertheless, apart from conveying the explicit meaning to the public they have impact on the psyche of the people; individual's imagination is invoked and he tends to associate the said message to the chain of other messages also. These silent but eloquent messages on public places are deployed to catch the attention of the public in general and consequent communication takes place. When the term--'communication' has already been defined and evaluated now it is imperative to take the terms like—'sign' or 'ideogram or pictogram', 'symbol' into critical evaluation. To decipher the meaning in any sign or symbol one has to take resort to Semiotics, the scientific study of deciphering the signs and symbols and deriving the meaning. W. M. Urban's views put forward the value of symbol in human life. He opines, "...the discovery or invention of symbols is the greatest of all human discoveries ranking on a par or ahead of the domestication of fire and animals" (Urban, 1961 pp. 53).

Madonna Gauding in her book, *The Signs and Symbols Bible* defines symbol or sign to be---"something that stands for, or represents, something other than what it is" (Gauding, 2009. pp. 08).

As per the etymology of the term traced by Gauding 'symbol' is based on Greek verb 'Symballein' also suggests hiding or veiling of meaning. Instead of getting deeper into the broad concept of the term 'sign' it must be restricted to the understanding of it in context with public places only. Actually, an ideogram is Chinese concept but, in general, used ubiquitously. It is a sign or symbol to represent the idea on things. In simpler terms it is synonymous to sign and often used at public places. Signs or ideographs at public places are meant for the public in general and thus often simplified. A few signs or ideograms at public places are to be taken for discussion and analysis hereunder.

### ❖ Symbols of Traffic Rules



A symbol at road side says more than one thing as the perception of the public goes. However it is meant and used to convey one stipulated meaning as the instruction to those who drive or come there. A symbol has power of free play as analyzed by Dr. D S Kainthura, " In fact, the other basic use of symbol is simple self-expression. Even sometimes symbols may be considered a kind of self communication... certain symbols have connotative—persuasive which, arises discourse and concern about the situation and happenings expressed in these symbols" (Kainthura, 2005. pp. 235). Undoubtedly, certain symbols express themselves in this way or that while other carries the connotative message to be conveyed to one on the basis of his commonly shared experiences. But most commonly, the symbols at public places express a situation or thought as explained in the symbols hereafter.

- **Men at Work**



This universally approved sign is used under the category of traffic rules for the communication of warning to the general public at road. When some renovation work or construction is going on this sign is most often used as caution. This image of a human figure working with a hoe or a shovel suggests the presence of some work around. When communication takes place through this sign the process of meaning derivation, associating or differentiating this signifiers to other signified ideas at once get on to work in the mind of an individual. He tends to associate this image to work and labour and comes to the understanding of the meaning therein. The mind knows that the image is **not of the man lying or taking rest** but working. On the basis of collectively shared universal or cultural experiences we associated such easy-to-grasp images with the underlying ideas. The ideas coming to one's mind with this images may have the structured binary of work/rest, laborer/aristocrat etc.

- **Horn Prohibited**





This sign clearly indicates the suggestion not to use horn of the vehicle. While coming across this symbol the public at once tend to decipher the message for communication through this signifier symbol and the things associated with this viz. signified. At linear level this ideogram belongs to the other signs like *'Men at Work'*, *'Railway Crossing'*, *'No U Turn'* etc. And in other ways this image invokes the binary of difference in one's mind. The red bar or line crossing picture of a trumpet stands for prohibition of using trumpet. But this trumpet is not supposedly taken as trumpet but as the horn of the vehicle. Nonetheless this image is set to inculcate the ideas and images of musical instruments like flute, drums, saxophone etc. Paradoxically, this symbol of *Not Playing Trumpet* or *Blowing Horn* may invoke the feeling of playing the musical instrument.

The prohibition of blowing horn also invokes one's imagination in direction of investigating the possible factor or reason for not blowing the horn. On the basis of commonly shared experiences in human society one logically ascribes this need of silence to the presence of some hospital or some religious or other sensitive faculty. The idea that noise can cause some damage to the inhabitants around may hover in the mind of the visitor. The communication through such sign board may have different dimensions. It is also possible that such free play of meaning deriving process from the set structures of signification may not take place in the mind of the people; and they just follow the rule just as it is necessary.

- **School Zone**

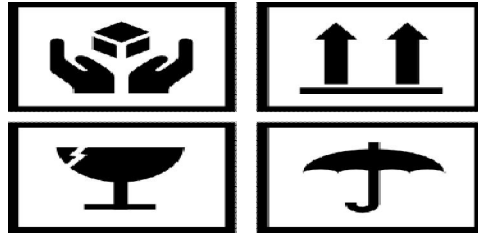


The figure of children walking may bring the idea of sensitivity of matter into one's mind. This, obviously, asks one to slow down and be careful as the children around may be careless. This caution is expectant from the grown up sensible people be alert to avoid any possible unwanted happening. The mind of the visitor may possible be visited with the thought of children while communicating to this symbol. They may be reminded of the children of their own. In case of some absentminded philosopher this sign may help him by reminding him his child he left behind and forgot. Besides, this should create the image and idea of school. The commonly shared experience of an individual in the case of the school image reminds him his own school though this one around may have different settings and looks.





## ❖ Other Public Signs



## • Toilet Doors



Rather than clear mention through words like-- 'Gents', 'Ladies' or 'He', 'She' or other similar words for suggesting gender specified entry into toilet the signs showing the human figures work more effectively. It is on the basis of long-held structured binary in the collective unconscious that one is able to associate a figure to the gender. Structured binary for a female figure i.e. *feminine not masculine* helps in proper communication. Similarly, the pictures of play card king and queen representing man and woman respectively can connect one's thought to other imaginations.

In case of man one may go by tracing the lines of moustaches on the face of the king and he at once makes a right choice. Slim figure of woman unlike the that of heavier of man carries the hint for woman entry only. These figures as signifiers may let one's imagination catapult into other realms of household wherein the perennial but different figures of two genders represent each entity.

- **Differently Able/Physically Challenged/Handicapped or Wheel Chair Access**



This sign at public places as on toilet doors is set to carry to hint for specified class. Others are not supposed to occupy the place; be it toilet, seat in a bus or train, retiring room and so on. Communication through a symbol or ideogram is possible in its comparison and contrast to other signs. This sign having human figure on chair (supposedly wheel chair) flashes the image of somebody with disability. This cognitive process of communication functions in quick time. In other words the communication through certain signs at public places may invoke different connotations of meaning in one's mind; yet one is supposed to derive the right and stipulated message therein and follow the rule.

Written texts set to convey messages, instructions and cautions to the public at public places or inside or on the buses, trains and trucks are often succinct, telegraphic and terse. The language of these is telegraphic avoiding the use of punctuation marks and other grammatical components so that the message can be conveyed with the economy of few words only. For example, if the caution or messages of the prohibition of strolling nearby sensitive area the text like this may not work-- "*Strolling Here Aimlessly is Prohibited*"

The above sentence is too long to let the public have patience and read it carefully. Rather a telegraphic, terse text having very few words shall work--- **“No Loitering”**. Actually people are so conditioned with frequent exposures to such messages and associated meaning therein that they very quickly get the meaning in others messages and the effective communication takes place. A few written public messages, cautions and instructions are to be taken here to find the process of communication taking place therein.



Although this public message should have been taken into evaluation under the category of ‘signs at public places’ in previous chapter, it has been taken here for analysis as it has an obvious text communicating the idea of the prohibition of smoking. When communication starts with the public through this message the poetics of smoking with certain connotations also starts taking shape in the mind apart from its desired meaning of prohibition of smoking. While perceiving this message, probably at petrol pumps, cinemas, parks, railway station, inside buses and trains, around gas or chemical plants or almost at all public places, the free play of comparing and contrasting the idea of smoking or not smoking on the basis of set structured binaries in mind also comes to ignition. The idea of *No Smoking* brings in mind the first the idea of *Smoking* and the resultant images of cigarettes, biris and even that of hookah.



The concerned authorities at public places have to ensure the cleanliness and hygiene at their premises. The idea of keeping the premises clean and neat has to be corresponded to the visiting public through certain messages or instruction like shown above. The authorities provide dustbins or litterbins for the public use so that the garbage or the dust can be confined to these boxes rather than be spread here and there.

When the communication starts take place through these instructions with the public the idea of cleanliness and hygiene is conveyed though it may have different connotation depending upon the individual experiences in the past. The instruction '*Do Not Litter*' supposedly brings the idea and image of dustbin around; the reader of this message is directed to feel the presence of dustbin at the premise. Similarly, the instruction '*No Spitting*' may give the idea of cleanliness and the mind of the visitor may have similar kind of associated ideas that denotes similarity or difference to this signifier. *No Spitting*, undoubtedly, carried the word 'spit' though in gerund form and thus it may bring the idea of spitting first. The binary formed in our universally or culturally shared 'collective unconscious' suggests the structures of littering/not littering, dirty/clean, spitting/not spitting etc. Moreover, other messages, instructions and cautions at public places like '**No Parking**', '**Safety Saves**', '**Stick No Bills**', '**No Thorough Fare**' etc. invokes the imagination and thus certain associated or dissociated ideas in the mind of the public and communication starts.

Having discussed and analyzed the concept of communication at public places through certain signs, ideograms, symbols, text instructions, cautions and messages it is now clear that such communication takes place through cognitive process. The structural signification plays a vital role in deciphering the meaning therein while communicating. The concept of communication is not limited to mere written treatises or verbal communication like speech, monologue, dialogue, song etc. Rather communication is everywhere where there is life. Certain facial expressions, movement of hands in different styles, various gestures etc. are the forms and tools of communication and thus put forward the contents of mind.

Communication through written treatises serves different purpose in accordance of type of the readers and the purpose of that treatise. Similarly verbal communication too is possible depending upon the mindset of the listeners that how they perceive the speaker. Communication, in that sense, is an ubiquitous phenomenon and it involves different entities of life.

Any word or utterance is a signifier of many similar signified words or utterances teeming in the mind of the reader or listener to be associated with the signifier.

No word or utterance has its meaning in isolation; but it can be communicated through its difference from other words in the organizational chain in our mind. Thus 'cat' is communicated as 'cat' only by virtue of its difference from 'rat' or 'mat'. The concept of *Surface structure* and *Deep structure*, propounded by Noam Chomsky, is of great importance while getting into the very core the process of communication in various forms. Underlying deep structure has control over the surface structure to determine the meaning for effective communication.

Since the communication through messages or texts on instruction boards, cautions, signs boards etc. at public places is set to convey the stipulated message to the public, yet one's imagination may also become functional and he tends to associate the said message to the chain of other messages. When coming across certain signs of instructions or messages at public places the perceiver's mind gets activated in the process of communication and meaning derivation from them. The public sign or symbol of '**Men at Work**' invites many related thoughts and experiences of human labour. The image of single one man working in that sign also bring the contradiction in our mind that the term 'Men' represents many but it shows only one. This image of a human figure working with a spade or a shovel suggests the presence of some work around. But the meaning from such symbols is restricted to the stipulated one as a symbol has power to invoke one's imagination and convey different meaning as well as viewed by M M Monipally, " The core feature of a symbol is that it is arbitrary and multilayered. No symbol has a fixed meaning" (Monipally, 2001. pp. 07).

In the same way, the sign of '**No Horn Please**' showing the picture of a trumpet can induce in our mind the ideas and images of musical instruments like flute, drums, saxophone etc. Paradoxically, this symbol of *Not Playing Trumpet or Blowing horn* invokes the idea of playing the musical instrument. The sign of '**School Ahead**' showing the image of school children reminds us the presence of school around and that of children at home or in society. The sensitivity behind this sign is also obvious as the innocents may have to suffer due to our rash driving.

The images on public toilet doors are set to invoke our imagination and we resolve to find that if something not male must be female; and this pre-set assumptions based on the structural idea of difference help us in making right choice. The sign having the image of *'Physically Challenged Person'* at public places like on toilet doors carries the hint for specified class. Others are not supposed to occupy the place; be it toilet, seat in a bus or train, retiring room etc.

While the texts of the messages, instructions and cautions for people at public places or inside or on the buses, trains and trucks often have very succinct, telegraphic and terse language. For the sake of economy of words the punctuation and grammatical rules are avoided; the messages appear rather in telegraphic form. The **'No Smoking'** message is very common at public places. At the time of communication of public through this message the poetics of smoking with certain connotations also gets activated in the mind apart from hinting its desired meaning of prohibition of smoking. The free play of finding similarity and difference between the idea of smoking and not smoking on the basis of set structured binaries in mind also comes into action.

The message or instruction of **'No Littering' or 'No Spitting'** explains the idea of keeping the public premises clean and neat. When the communication through such messages starts taking shape the binary of difference is formed in our universally or culturally shared 'collective unconscious' and thus suggests the structures of littering/not littering, dirty/clean, spitting/not spitting etc. In a nutshell, the communication at public places through certain signs, symbols, text messages, instructions, cautions etc. implies the complicated cognitive process in the mind of those who perceive them. The process of such communication involves the use of set structural binaries we collectively share in our mind.

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