Chapter 2

A Note on Metacommunication

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This short article, originally written in 1966 and previously unpublished in English, is a report on a series of meetings held at the MRI in 1966 to discuss *metacommunication*. Its historical significance arises initially from the participants in the seminar: a combination of the "first generation" MRI theorists (Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, John H. Weakland, Paul Watzlawick), visitors (Veron, Lennard), and a younger MRI generation (Carlos Sluzki, Janet Beavin, Art Bodin). Although much of the work of the MRI was stimulated by meetings of this kind, few explicit records exist. The present note illustrates the high level of collaborative discussion in which important tenets of a general theory of communication (not limited to pathology or the family) were examined, clarified, and advanced.

In our view, there is not only historical but contemporary theoretical value to the ideas discussed and the distinctions proposed—distinctions that have often been treated subsequently with considerably less subtlety than is evidenced here. For example: The relation of verbal to nonverbal aspects of a message is *not* isomorphic to communication and metacommunication (or to content and relationship, or to fact and emotion, or any other simple dichotomy). It is suggested that digital and analogic encodings be put on a continuum and examined for similarities rather than always being contrasted. The generality and utility of the Theory of Logical Types for nonverbal information is questioned. Three concrete definitions of "context" are offered, and some useful connections to information theory and general linguistics are implied.

This paper was submitted in 1966 to *Family Process*. Jay Haley (as Editor) sent it to Gregory Bateson, who recommended publication along with a comment of his. Somehow, we dropped the ball (probably because Sluzki returned to Buenos Aires and Beavin began graduate school), and this note was published only in Spanish, in a slightly abridged version.[1] The original, below, has had only trivial corrections, as has the Bateson comment (which has some prophetic comments about "twenty years hence").

In the words of the old radio program, "Return with us now to the days of yesteryear . . . "

A NOTE ON METACOMMUNICATION
Carlos E. Sluzki and Janet Beavin

The term *metacommunication* was introduced by Gregory Bateson (1951) and defined as "communication about communication," that is, all exchanged cues and propositions about either codification or the relationship between the communicators, or both. This concept has been subsequently found useful and adopted by different researchers in psychiatry and human communication: For example, Watzlawick (1964) described metacommunication as the *relationship* (as distinguished from the content) aspect of communication. Scheflen, Birdwhistell, and their colleagues (e.g., Scheflen, 1965a, 1965b) have used the term in their context analysis. Morris and Wynne (1965) report finding the metacommunicational level especially relevant in the study of schizophrenics' parents' communication. And, as is well known, the Double-Bind Theory (Bateson et al., 1956) based a description of certain pathological communication patterns within families on a distinction between communication and metacommunication, and further work following this line has, implicitly or explicitly, assumed metacommunicational phenomena. But adoption also meant adaptation. The term has been framed quite differently by different researchers and, in many cases, not framed at all, the result of which was lack of clarity as to the meaning or meanings of the term and its framework.

With the aim of discussing and perhaps clarifying the field of metacommunication, a seminar was held at the Mental Research Institute, Palo Alto, for seven meetings during the second half of

January and the first half of February 1966, with the full-time participation of Janet Beavin, Jay Haley, Carlos E. Sluzki, Eliseo Veron, Paul Watzlawick, and John H. Weakland, and the part-time participation of Arthur Bodin, Don D. Jackson, and Henry Lennar.[2] The following is a report on this seminar, which the senior author organized and directed.[3]

Several points which underlie the concept of metacommunication were reviewed: (1) We immediately encounter the general difficulty of having only natural language with which to discuss and understand communication and metacommunication (rather than, for instance, some additional symbolic language); there are formal problems regarding the consistency of a model for which the language and framework are the same as the object of observation, and in human communication, this problem of self-reflexivity is a profound one. (2) At a more specific level, it was agreed that there is not necessarily ever any "primary" message[4] (e.g., the verbal component) to which the other aspects (e.g., the nonverbal elements) are "meta-messages." That is, no assumptions were made of an isomorph between logical levels and communication channels.

(3) Regarding verbal and nonverbal channels of communication, it was recalled that they have been to some extent distinguished as digital and analogic, respectively (Bateson, 1951; Bateson and Jackson, 1964), but this distinction should be seen as a continuum, not a dichotomy. That is, although problems of "translation" from one mode to the other can be noted, it is as important and valuable to examine their similarities and interrelations as their differences. It is inadvisable to assign primacy to either, in any sense of "reality" or "the basic message." We can, of course, have a metacommunicational relation between analogic and digital messages, with all the usual possibilities for ambiguity *or* clarification, but the situation is basically similar to the cases where both messages are analogic or both digital.

(4) The Russellian Theory of Logical Types, the most frequently used analogy for the notion of *levels* (especially level and meta-level) in communication (Bateson, 1951; 1954) usefully illustrates the importance of distinguishing levels, although its specific concepts of class and member were felt to be more strictly appropriate

for metalinguistic (purely verbal) relations than for natural (including nonverbal) communication.

(5) Two principles of the linguist Jakobson (1956) were introduced in order to explore their usefulness for comprehension of metacommunicational relations, especially in other than linguistic channels: (a) Through a reconstruction of the code, the observer can establish the relations of a given message to the other signs of the code (the complete, implicit set composed of the chosen message and all the alternative messages that *could have been used* instead of the one chosen), that is, the *selection* made by the sender. The message, hence, conveys not only the information of its own content, but also information about the decision made by the sender to use *that* message, out of all the possible others. (b) Through an analysis of the context in which any message is sent, the observer can also study the contiguity relation between that sign and the rest of the signs in the message package, as well as those in the temporal vicinity of the sequence, that is, the *combination* of elements made by the sender.

Partly on the basis of the above, a series of progressive distinctions, or identifications of areas in the field of communication, were made:

First, there is the problem of the meaning of the term *about* in the definition of metacommunication (communication about communication). Specifically, *to whom* is a message *about* another message–to the sender, the receiver, or the observer? For if one wants to avoid subjective conceptualizations such as *intentions*, it does not seem possible to establish the existence of message and meta-message according to the properties of the message itself. What the observer does is to reconstruct the operations of the sender on the one side and, in order to establish the validity of thes model, may predict responses of the receiver to whatever communicational stimuli he or she decides to study. From the observer's point of view, the assessing of the *about* is not a logical problem, but essentially an instrumental one, that is, entirely conventional.

Second, there are *explicit* and *implicit* meta-messages. Only the metalinguistic messages–those whose test refers to the meaning of other messages, for instance, definitions–would seem to be truly explicit (with their content thus generally clear, although ultimately

the observer is still responsible for the analytic labeling and description of even this material, as was mentioned above). All others must be reconstructed by operations of the observer; both their existence (as they are not explicitly contained in the communicational material) and their content are solely products of analysis.

Third, it seems that the study of implicit meta-messages corresponds to the study of *messages in their context* and thus more or less coincides with what has generally been called, after Morris (1938), the "pragmatics" of communication. Three ways to specify the nature of the context were identified:

(i) The *code* as the context in which a message is sent. This is related to the selection operation, that is, the message has a relation of substitution with other elements of the code, this relation implying a meta-message. The code is any set of possibilities; as Ashby has illustrated this:

The information carried by a particular message depends on the set it comes from. *The information conveyed is not an intrinsic property of the individual message.* That this is so can be seen by considering the following example. Two soldiers are taken prisoner by two enemy countries, A and B, one by each; and their two wives later each receive the brief message "I am well." It is known, however, that country A allows the prisoner a choice from

I am well,
I am slightly ill,
I am seriously ill,

while country B allows only the message

I am well

meaning "I am alive." (Also in the set is the possibility of "no message.") The two wives will certainly be aware that though each has received the same phrase, the information that they have received is by no means identical. (Ashby, 1956, p. 124)

(ii) *Other emitted messages,* more or less continuous to a given message, as its context; this type corresponds to the com-

bination principle. Bateson described this principle independently and offered the example of an extemporizing dancer:[5]

> For any given movement within a sequence of movements, it is evident that . . . the dancer's choice is influenced (largely) by the ongoing characteristics of his sequence of action, and even, perhaps, by the ongoing dancing of a partner (Bateson, 1951, p. 184). See also the "quasi-courtship" cues described by Scheflen (1965a). The juxtaposition of messages over time or across channels results in a metacommunicative combination.

(iii) The *interactional situation* in which the message is emitted as the context which specifies its content, which may thus vary with the character of the interactional situation, each situation presenting a code of social (interpersonal) restrictions that limits and, up to a certain point, determines the repertoire of possible metacommunicative meanings.

These three ways of specifying context (and metacommunication) imply very different research strategies.

Fourth, comparing successive conceptual models in the literature, as well as within the discussion during the seminar, there seems to be a movement from the description of single items (whether this item be a message or a person) to the *relational* level, taking as minimal unit of observation *at least two things in relation to each other*–two levels, persons, messages, item and class, etc. The lack of many precedents for this approach, and the lack of a suitable model for the conceptualization of this focus, made it necessary to restate it very carefully once and again, especially since the usual focus in the science of human behavior and, thus, the habitual thinking of its researchers, are more centered on the single element than on relationships.

COMMENT
Gregory Bateson

If something remains 20 years hence of what we were trying to say in the VA project, I would hope that the ideas will then look

quite different and be dressed up in a quite different language. I doubt if *meta-communication* will be a fashionable term, and I am sure that *analogic* and *digital* will be dropped from these contexts. C. F. Hockett's term *iconic* is already better than *analogic*. Of course, there will surely be some sort of classification of the ways in which one bunch of physical events or objects can give "information" about another, i.e., a classification of ways of coding–perhaps several such classifications.

Sometimes I wonder whether we ever treated seriously enough the most basic premise of communication theory: that there are no "things" or reifiable entities within the explanatory system–*only* coded message material. There therefore can be no "explicit" message. The "name," however iconic or representational, can never be the thing named. The percept is never the thing perceived. And so on. The reference to the thing can only be *implicit* in the name, never explicit. The nearest thing to an explicit message is the case where an event or object seems to propose the fact of its own existence. But, of course, this is still nonsense. What enters through our sense organs is still only a transform or coded version of the referent.

If I tell you "this piece of paper is square" and you want to check the truth of my message, you will not compare my message with the paper. You will, either by perception or use of instruments, prepare another *description* of the paper. You will then compare my description with that other. In other words, my description is not "about" the paper. It is about other descriptions of the paper. What I assert by saying "this piece of paper is square" is simply that there will be overlap of information, i.e., redundancy, between my message and other descriptions of the paper. In this sense, messages are always and only about other message material.

So it all boils down to *redundancy*. If it is raining and I say "it is raining" and you look out the window, you will get less information from the perceived raindrops than you would have gotten, had I not spoken. A message is *always* about other message material (e.g., about percepts, which we erroneously call "things"). It is convenient to refer to one part of the double system as a *referent*. But a message is simply that which creates redundancy in the system made up of message-plus-referent; and redundancy is always a *mutual* overlapping.

The reference or subject matter of meta-communication is always this redundancy-creating *relationship* between some lower order message and its referent. It was surely a mistake to speak of a meta-message as being about another message. I should have said that a meta-message is about the *relationship* between some other message and its referent. It was *almost* all right to say that if message A is about the coding of message B, then A is meta to B. After all "coding" is not a characteristic of a message, but of a relationship between a message and its referent.

The questions is: into what universe or domain does what we used to call a *meta-message* bring redundancy? It is a *meta-message* if it brings redundancy into the universe,

[M = (m + r)], where M is the meta-message
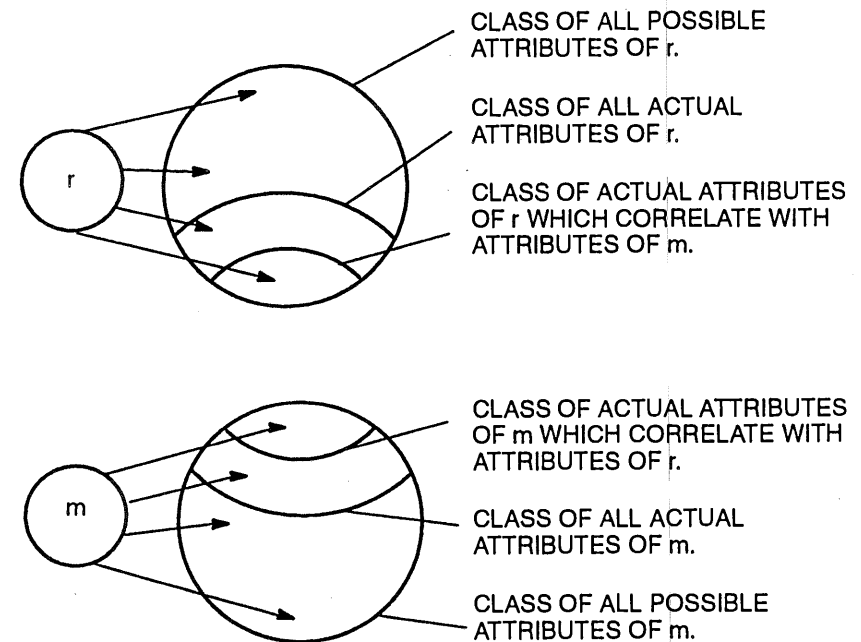m, the lower order message
r, the referent of the lower order message.

The great advantage of stating all this in terms of "redundancy" is that this latter term is always reciprocal, referring to an *overlapping* of informational content.

This being so, the + signs in the above expression are not simply additive. What is intended is that units bracketed constitute a domain which contains redundancy; and the redundancy referred to is such that information is repeated across the + sign. (m + r) means that m contains some information which is also contained in r.

It is interesting to note that *reinforcement* is the prototype of meta-communication. The diagram is: [Reinforcement + (Stimulus + Response)] The attached diagram may help–perhaps.

And that is, I guess, why the typical sequences of experimental learning contain these *three* components. There must be three items if one of them is to be about the *relationship* between the other two.

Note that this diagram is itself an M, such that [M + (m + r)]. Also *any* message about the relationships in this diagram is an M. For example, the message "in (m + r), m is in verbal English," would partly tell the receiver where to look for the attributes of m which will be redundant (i.e., correlate with) attributes of r.

DIAGRAM OF (m + r)

CLASS OF ALL POSSIBLE ATTRIBUTES OF r.

CLASS OF ALL ACTUAL ATTRIBUTES OF r.

CLASS OF ACTUAL ATTRIBUTES OF r WHICH CORRELATE WITH ATTRIBUTES OF m.

CLASS OF ACTUAL ATTRIBUTES OF m WHICH CORRELATE WITH ATTRIBUTES OF r.

CLASS OF ALL ACTUAL ATTRIBUTES OF m.

CLASS OF ALL POSSIBLE ATTRIBUTES OF m.

NOTES

1. Dluxki, V. R. (1966). Seminario sobre metacommunicacion. *Acta psiquiatricia y psicologica de America latina, 12,* 2-4.

2. Beavin, Bodin, Haley, Lennard, Sluzki, Watzlawick, and Weakland are Research Associates of the Mental Research Institute, of which Dr. Jackson is Director. Veron is Associate Professor, University of Buenos Aires, Department of Sociology. Lennard is Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California School of Medicine. Sluzki is also Chief of the Research Department at the Psychopathology Service, G. Araoz Alfaro Hospital, Lanus (Prov. of Buenos Aires), Argentina.

3. The ideas herein are thus a product of collective work for which the authors must give credit to the group, while retaining responsibility for their present formulation.

4. The term "message" is used in this note to refer to any of the analytic elements of the communication package. At this early stage of the study of human

communication, these components have yet to be exhaustively identified. They certainly include, at the least, the content, syntactic, and semantic structure of the text of the verbal utterances, the tone, pitch, and rhythm of the voice; gestures, positions, and movements of the body; and structural or temporal relations between these (the latter, we will suggest, being one form of metacommunication).

5. He called this "progressive integration," having described something very like selection as "selective integration."

Chapter 3

The Interactional Theory and Therapy of Don D. Jackson

Wendel A. Ray

It has been more than 25 years since Don Jackson died unexpectedly at the age of 48. He continues to be revered as having been a gifted clinician, theoretician, and one of the most influential forces ever in the field of family therapy. Brilliant and perennially idealistic, Jackson was convinced that the shift within the behavioral sciences from viewing the individual in isolation to envisioning the individual in context announced the beginning of a new age of understanding about the interconnected nature of human behavior.

Jackson is best remembered for his leading part in the development of such concepts as family homeostasis, family rules, relational quid pro quo, and, with Bateson, Weakland, and Haley, the theory of the Double Bind. And yet, with the exception of a few scattered tributes highlighting important aspects of his work (Ackerman, 1970; Greenberg, 1977; Weakland and Greenberg, 1977; Zuk, 1981) Jackson's contribution to family theory, phenomenal for its breadth and scope, has never been adequately documented.

He was the first clinician to uncompromisingly maintain a higher order cybernetic and constructivist position in the practice of therapy. The essence of his model is seeing the client as a "family-surrounded individual with real problems in the present day" (Jackson, 1967c). Brief in orientation, the primary focus, questions asked, assignments and tasks given are *always* on the *relationship*