
**COMMUNICATION QUALITY:
Towards an Intersubjective Understanding of Quality**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to discuss the concept of communication quality in the context of the business process. The basic idea behind the concept of communication quality is that high quality communication is equal to a meaningful use of language. This implies that the concept of communication quality will be grounded in the philosophy of language and foremost in speech-act theory and communicative action theory. The concept of communication quality is focused on the intersubjective and social aspects of quality in the business process.

Keywords

Communication, Quality, Business process, Business relationship, Social interaction

1. THE BUSINESS PROCESS AS A TYPE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

The business process can be characterised as a type of social interaction where communication and material acts are performed. Goldkuhl (1997, p. 5) claims that: "*Making business involves with necessity communication otherwise customer and supplier cannot agree on the business deal. But business interaction cannot be reduced to only communication. It must include the material acts of delivering goods and/or services and paying.*"

The reason why communication is important and generic for the business process is that communication is used to perform generic business act like to request, offer, order or contract (Goldkuhl, 1997). These communication acts create actor relationships that imply commitments and obligations that must be fulfilled in the course of the business process. This implies that communication acts function as coordinating mechanisms for other actions that are performed in the business process. This means that the quality aspect of communication is very important; a business offering or a purchase contract with low quality creates inefficiency, bad quality both for the supplier and the customer, and a loss of trust and credibility.

2. SPEECH-ACT THEORY, FORMAL PRAGMATICS AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY

The basic idea behind the concept of communication quality is that communication of a high quality is equal to a meaningful use of language. Austin (1976) was a language philosopher who claimed that we cannot understand what is meant by meaningful usage of language if we believe that the only function of language is to make true or false statements about the world. Austin claimed that besides description of reality we also use the language to *promise, offer, order, warn, request*, etc., i.e. speech acts that cannot be evaluated as either true or false. Austin made an analysis of successful speech acts and arrived at the conclusion that the success of a speech act has to be evaluated both with the criteria true/false and happy/unhappy. Austin also showed that speech acts are constituted by two components: a locutionary (an information content component) and an illocutionary component (an action component).

This can be illustrated by the following speech acts:

I **assert** to you that the *price of the car is 150,000*.

I **offer** you *the car at a price of 150,000*.

In the two utterances above the action component is constituted by the illocutionary verbs *assert* and *offer*, and the information content is constituted by the *proposition about the car*. The two components of the speech-act show the double structure of language and that the meaning of a speech act must be determined at two levels:

Predicative meaning. The function of the information content is to assign an attribute to an identifiable object, i.e. the attribute price to the object car in the speech-acts above.

Illocutionary meaning. The function of the action component is to decide the communication modus i.e. whether the speech act should be used cognitively (assert) or interpersonally (offer).

Habermas is a language philosopher and sociologist that has developed speech-act theory into a theory of *formal pragmatics*. The objective of formal pragmatics is "*an attempt at rationally reconstructing universal and necessary presuppositions and rules of speech actions oriented to reaching understanding*" (Habermas, 1984, p. 138). The universal rules behind formal pragmatics are that a speaker that performs a speech act and who is oriented towards mutual understanding must raise universal validity claims: comprehensibility, truth, sincerity and rightness, and presuppose that these validity claims will be accepted by the listener. Successful communication implies that the listener must both *comprehend*, and *accept*, the speech act as trustworthy, i.e. the speaker and listener must agree on the speech act.

Habermas' interest in speech-act theory and the reason he developed the formal pragmatic theory is due to his aim to analyse the importance of human communication as a co-ordinating mechanism for social interaction. It is this analysis Habermas (1984) carries through in the theory of communicative action, where social action is defined as *a social interaction where two or more social actors are co-ordinating their material acts and speech acts to carry out their plans of action*.

3 COMMUNICATION QUALITY

The concept of communication quality can be discussed in relation to speech act theory, formal pragmatics and communicative action theory and the communication model presented in the figure below.

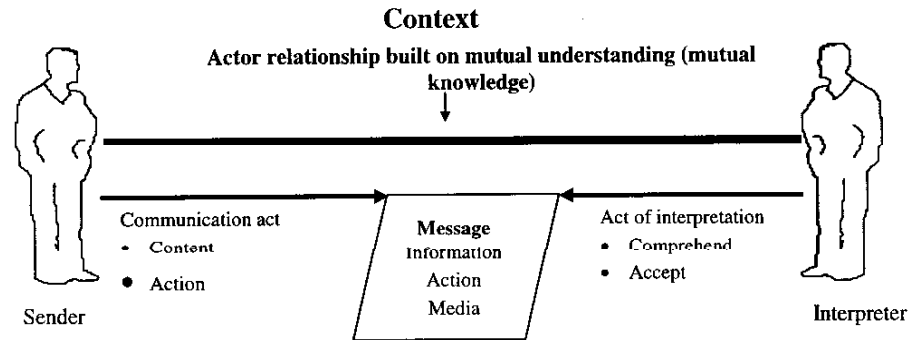


Figure 1 A Model for Human Communication

In the model the sender (speaker) performs a communication act which is communicated in a message. The communication act is constituted by a propositional information component and an action component. In the model I use the term sender instead of speaker, communication act instead of speech act, and interpreter for the listener. The reason for this is that the speech act can be performed by other media than spoken language i.e. paper documents and electronic media. The communication act is performed in an action context. The communication act that is performed can, for example, be a business offer in the context of a car deal. If the communication act is to succeed it must be both comprehended and accepted by the interpreter. If the interpreter comprehends and accepts the communication act with respect to the validity claims (comprehensibility, sincerity, rightness, truth) the sender and the interpreter have reached a mutual understanding about something in the world. This also means that the actors have created an actor relationship which implies commitments and obligations that govern the interaction sequel. This implies that the quality of the interaction sequel is dependent of the quality of the agreement.

The communication that takes place when the actors are trying to reach understanding of something in the world can generally be described as a process where several communication acts are performed.

In this process the actors alternately take the role of sender or interpreter. For example, in a car deal we can have the following sequence of communication acts.

1. I offer you the car at a *price of 150,000* (the car dealer is the sender and the customer is the interpreter)
2. I buy the car for 150,000 (the customer is the sender and the car dealer is the interpreter)

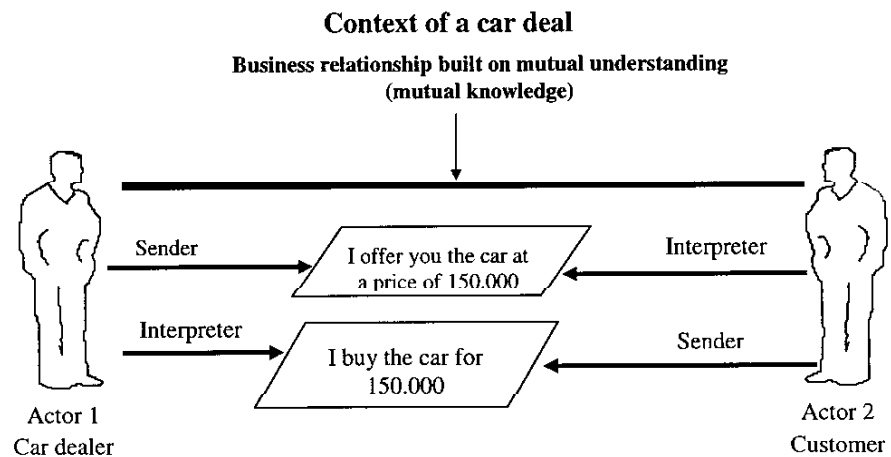


Figure 2 Several communication acts are performed in the process of reaching understanding.

In line with Habermas' idea of meaningful communication I contend that meaningful communication can be defined as communication that contributes to the establishment of actor relationships based on mutual understanding (mutual knowledge). This implies that communication quality can be recognised as *communication with qualities that contribute to actor relationships based on mutual understanding*.

With this definition in mind and the communication model in figures 1 and 2 we can present the following generic criteria for communication quality:

1. Communication with a relevant and comprehensible information content.
2. Communication with a relevant and understandable action aspect.
3. Comprehensible communication.
4. Trustworthy communication.
5. Communication that can be criticised, controlled and defended.

1) Communication with a relevant and comprehensible information content.

This dimension can be related to the information aspect and the predicative meaning of the communication act. It is important that the syntax and semantics of the information content of the communication is comprehensible. It is also important that the information content is relevant for the actual action context where the communication is taking place.

2) Communication with a relevant and understandable action aspect.

This dimension can be related to the action aspect of the communication and the illocutionary meaning of the communication. The action aspect of communication, e.g. request, offer or assertion, indicates what kind of actor relationship that is intended. It is also important that the action aspect is relevant. For example, a promise is only relevant if it is not obvious to the interpreter that the sender would carry out the promised action anyway.

3) Comprehensible communication.

The communication must be comprehensible, which means recognition of the claim for comprehensibility. This implies that the sender and interpreter must understand the language that is used. This also implies that the syntax and the semantics of the communication must be of high quality. The comprehensibility of the communication is also dependent on the actors' implicit preunderstanding of the action context.

4) Trustworthy communication.

To accept a communication act implies that the interpreter knows the conditions that make the communication act acceptable. Acceptance or agreement from the part of the interpreter means recognition of the validity claims (truth, sincerity, rightness) that are raised by the sender. The trustworthiness of these validity claims is dependent on the credibility warrant that is issued by the sender when the communication is performed (Habermas, 1984).

5) Communication that can be criticised, controlled and defended.

The trustworthiness of the communication act must be based on the good reasons that must be provided if the trustworthiness of the communication act is challenged. This implies that the quality of communication presupposes that the interpreter has the chance to control and criticise the communication act and that the sender is able to defend his communication act if it is criticised.

These five criteria are generic for communication quality and the criteria can be put together in the table below where the five generic criteria are related to Habermas' universal validity claims.

Table 1 Generic communication quality criteria

Generic communication quality criteria	Validity claims
C1 Communication with a relevant and comprehensible information content	comprehensibility
C2 Communication with a relevant and understandable action aspect	truth, sincerity, rightness
C3 Comprehensible communication	comprehensibility
C4 Trustworthy communication	truth, sincerity, rightness
C5 Communication that can be criticised, controlled and defended	comprehensibility, truth, sincerity, rightness

These five generic criteria are important for communication quality but communication also function as a coordinating mechanism for other actions. This implies that communication must be related to the context of the social interaction where the communication is performed. This means that the concept of communication quality in the business process must be evaluated in relation to other actions that are performed in the business process. For example, the sincerity of the actors can, in the end, only be proved by the actors by showing that their agreements and commitments have consequences for their further actions. This means that *reliability*, which is defined as *the actors fulfilling agreements and commitments made*, is another important aspect of communication quality. In context of a business process communication quality can then be defined as *communication and other actions with qualities that contribute to business relationships based on mutual understanding and trust*. Trustworthy communication (see criteria 5 above) and *reliability* can be related to Grönroos' (1990) discussion about functional quality where Grönroos emphasises the importance of the supplier making correct promises, making the promises in a correct way and fulfilling the promises and commitments made. The problem with Grönroos' discussion about functional quality, from a communication quality point-of-view, is the focus on the supplier. It is the promises of the supplier and the supplier's obligation to fulfil his promises and commitments that are emphasised. This is different compared to the communication quality point-of-view where the mutuality and social aspects of promises and commitments are stressed.

The point with the concept of communication quality is that the interaction in the business process must focus *both on supplier and customer commitments* because the customer also makes promises and commitments that must be fulfilled in the course of the business process.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have presented the concept of communication quality. The concept has been grounded in speech-act theory, formal pragmatics and communicative action theory. The idea behind this has been to give the concept of communication quality a general, analytical and theoretical base grounded in the philosophy of language. Though the concept of communication is interesting from a theoretical perspective it is also important from a practical point-of-view. I contend that communication quality is important because it is focused on the intersubjective and social aspects of quality in the business process, an aspect of quality that has not yet been fully analysed and understood. The concept of communication quality is also becoming more and more important because of the increasing importance of relationships, interaction, communication (Bergman and Klevsjö, 1995) and information technology (Eriksson, 1998).

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