

Of Texts and Toggles: Categorical Versus Continuous Views of Communication

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Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) argued that researchers should not investigate text processing as being analogous to spoken conversation. They suggested that researchers studying text processing would be better served by treating texts as artifacts rather than as the products of authorial intentions. In our commentary, we provide 2 counterarguments to this analysis. First, we suggest that the claim “text is not communication,” as Dixon and Bortolussi framed it, creates a false dichotomy between situations of “communication” and “not communication.” Second, we argue that Dixon and Bortolussi needed to consider the cognitive psychological consequences of their claim.

Suppose Marvin is walking down the aisle at a grocery store. He stops in front of the cookie display and sees a brand of cookies brightly marked “New and Improved!” Marvin immediately chooses that brand of cookies. Has an act of communication transpired in this situation? Social psychologists who study persuasion typically would consider “New and Improved” a type of persuasive communication (cf. Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). However, Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) laid out criteria that suggested, quite firmly, that when Marvin reads the words “New and Improved,” this should not count as communication.

Dixon and Bortolussi’s (2001) overarching claim was that texts should not be treated as communication between authors and readers because readers, in most circumstances, can never hope to recover authors’ intended meanings. They supported this proposal with three observations about texts—each of which they intended to contrast with the type of communication that occurs in face-to-face conversations. Each observation applies to our “New and Improved” example.

First, in most conversational settings, speakers and addressees can interact with one another freely. By contrast, when Marvin reads “New and Improved,” the person who scripted these words is not available to provide confirmation or clarification of Marvin’s understanding. Second, in conversations, it is clear who originated an utterance, but with texts, readers are faced with the so-called authorial-identity problem: Namely, it is unclear whether intentions should be attributed to the real author, a narrator, an implied author, and so on. With respect to “New and Improved,” Marvin really has no way of knowing who is making the claim. Certainly, the person who thought up the words is not the same person who printed them on the package.

Finally, Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) suggested that conversations allow speakers and addressees to negotiate their way to a single intention for each utterance, whereas utterances in texts are always fraught with unresolvable ambiguities. In Wimsatt and Beardsley’s (1954) famous phrase, anyone who believes that texts give rise to unambiguous interpretations has succumbed to *the intentionalist fallacy*. In fact, if someone were to question Marvin about exactly what is “New” and “Improved” about the brand of cookies he has chosen to buy, he would quite likely have to admit that the phrase was considerably vague and ambiguous.

As we have just seen, although Marvin understands “New and Improved” and acts on his understanding (i.e., he purchases the bag of cookies), in Dixon and Bortolussi’s (2001) analysis this would not be considered communication. Based on such observations, Dixon and Bortolussi argued that researchers are better off studying texts as artifacts, independent of the processes that created them. They proposed a *feature–construction* framework for text processing, in which the primary research goal is to assess how specific textual features interact with reader constructions (i.e., inferences, discourse models, etc.) to lead readers toward particular understandings of texts. Given this framework, Dixon and Bortolussi argued that there is no need to assume any kind of communicative model when trying to understand what readers are doing when they process written texts.

We take issue with Dixon and Bortolussi’s (2001) claim for several reasons. The least important point concerns the claim’s exact words. What they really meant by “text is not communication” is stated more precisely elsewhere in their article: “Text is not communication in the same sense that conversation is communication” (p. 23). The shorthand “text is not communication” gives the impression, which we believe they did not intend, that texts do not inform people, change their opinions, change their behaviors, and so on. This impression is unfortunate.

Beyond that, we believe that Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) did not provide convincing support even for the more specific claim that conversations and texts are distinct types of communication. To support our conclusion, we make two types of argument. First, we suggest that Dixon and Bortolussi created a false dichotomy between conversations and texts where, in fact, a continuum exists. Second, we argue that they should have been more clear about the cognitive psychological consequences of their position. Without specific consideration of the conse-

quences for readers' processes and representations, the validity of an assertion like "text is not communication" remains murky. We conclude that the enduring value of Dixon and Bortolussi's arguments may be to serve as a reminder to researchers that they should be more precise in the way they phrase their theories.

WHAT IS "COMMUNICATION"?

Dixon and Bortolussi's (2001) description of conversation—their benchmark for "communication"—was, as they readily admitted, rather simple (cf. Clark, 1996; Gerrig, 1993): Speakers encode intended messages into utterances that addressees then attempt to decode, and success occurs when an addressee is able to construct a "match" to the speaker's intentions. The central feature of communication, in Dixon and Bortolussi's view, is interaction between speakers and addressees. Interaction is crucial because it allows interlocutors to converge on unique understandings of each other's intentions.

Based on this description, Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) made a series of judgments about what does and does not count as communication. In their analysis, written text, of course, is not communication. However, other situations fall outside of the realm of communication as well. For example, they suggested that "an oral commentary heard over the radio would seem to be most appropriately analyzed in terms of features and constructions [i.e., analyzed in the same manner as text rather than as communication] because there may be little opportunity to interact with the speaker" (p. 21).

This claim is rather startling because the situation appears to meet at least two of their three criteria for communication. Suppose the mayor of New York announces over the radio, "Even my opponents agree that the spraying for the West Nile virus has been a success." There is no doubt as to who originated the remark. There also appears to be little ambiguity in the mayor's intentions (i.e., he wishes to suggest that a controversial program met its goals). All that is missing, therefore, is the radio listeners' ability to interact with the mayor. With this one feature missing, Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) placed this form of language use into the category of "not communication." Unfortunately, it is not possible to treat the potential for interaction as a dichotomous variable. Among the great variety of types of language use, the potential for feedback and other forms of interaction falls very much along a continuous dimension. Let us consider some examples:

- A company president announces to her employees that she is going to give them a series of directives and that they may not interrupt her. When she is done, she dismisses them from her office. With respect to the employees, is this communication (on Dixon & Bortolussi's, 2001, view)?
- Three friends are having a conversation. The conversation is such that two of them are doing all of the talking, whereas a third, Bob, is merely listening. In fact,

Bob has formulated the specific intention not to speak and does not say anything for the next 20 min. The other two friends continue talking. With respect to Bob, is this communication?

- A debate is transpiring between two political candidates. The moderator can ask questions, but once the candidates begin their responses, the moderator is not allowed to interrupt. Furthermore, the moderator is not permitted to comment on a response once it is completed. The debate is carried out in front of a live audience, but the audience members can only listen and respond through typical means (e.g., applause, gasps, or sighs). With respect to either the moderator or the audience members, is this communication?

- Sarah is listening to a call-in radio show. Although the issue is very important to her, Sarah chooses not to call in to offer her views or disagree with earlier callers. With respect to Sarah, is this communication?

This list is clearly not exhaustive. Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) appeared to be in a position in which they had to vote yes or no to each situation: It either does or does not constitute communication. We intend our examples to suggest, instead, that the potential for interaction falls along a continuum. No theoretical benefit is gained by making categorical claims. To develop this point further, we turn to the issue of underlying cognitive processes and representations.

WHAT PROCESSES AND REPRESENTATIONS UNDERLIE "COMMUNICATION"?

For each of the scenarios we invented, we asked the question, "Is this communication?" We also might have made this point by asking, "Would people use different processes or encode different representations under these circumstances [by comparison to language use in canonical conversations]?" Suppose Chris is listening to the mayor of New York's statement over the radio, whereas Dale is attending the actual press conference. After the mayor has spoken, Dale asks him, "Does that mean there will be no more spraying?" Chris, listening at home, hears this exchange over the radio.

According to Dixon and Bortolussi (2001), Dale's experience would appear to constitute communication, but Chris's would not. Is this distinction accompanied by the claim that Chris and Dale engaged different processes or representations as they understood the mayor's words? Do people possess a mental toggle that activates different courses of processing and representation based on the potential for interaction? Processing differences play an explicit role in Dixon and Bortolussi's argument that "text is not communication." For example, they asserted that "the absence of the author is more than a nuisance factor." Instead, "it changes the nature of text processing in fundamental ways" (p. 8). Whether it was their intention, Dixon and Bortolussi's analysis of text appeared to demand

that a toggle exists to actuate the distinction between “communication” and “not communication.”

Suppose there is such a toggle: Under what circumstances would it be engaged? Suppose that after listening to the radio call-in show for 1 hr, Sarah becomes sufficiently enraged that she decides to call the station. Has the toggle now flipped from “not communication” to “communication”? Suppose she chooses to respond to a comment the show’s host made half an hour ago. Has Sarah’s experience of that moment retrospectively become communication? Does she go back and reprocess the host’s utterances, now that she has the intention to respond to them? Or, consider our earlier example of silent Bob. Suppose after 20 min, he decides that the time has come to make a contribution to the conversation. Does his mental toggle flip from “not communication” to “communication” because he is now engaged in a way that will allow him to participate? Again, if the claim that “text is not communication” is to have any substance, these are the types of questions it must address.

It might seem unfair that we are basing our critique of Dixon and Bortolussi’s (2001) analysis largely on nontextual circumstances of language use. However, our primary point is that there is no clear dichotomy between the types of questions that arise for texts and for other situations of language use with respect to the potential for interaction. Dixon and Bortolussi themselves embraced this form of argument when, for example, they likened radio broadcasts to be more like texts than conversations. We support Dixon and Bortolussi’s attempt to assimilate other types of language use to their analysis. However, in our view, Dixon and Bortolussi mistake a continuum for a dichotomy. Their theory implied a mental toggle without articulating the consequences.

DO OTHER CRITERIA DISTINGUISH TEXTS AND CONVERSATIONS?

Thus far, we have been focusing on only one of Dixon and Bortolussi’s (2001) three criteria: the potential for interaction. As we explained earlier, Dixon and Bortolussi had two other criteria for separating texts from conversations: the “intentional fallacy” and the authorial-identity problem. Gibbs (1999, this issue) argued quite convincingly that the intentional fallacy does not meaningfully distinguish texts and conversations. As such, the only criterion we believe requires further discussion is the question of authorial identity.

As with the other criteria, some of the evidence that Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) raised with respect to this problem does not fully serve to distinguish text from conversation. To understand this point, let us return to Marvin in the grocery store. We already noted, in accord with the identity problem, that Marvin could have no clear idea of who exactly bears responsibility for “New and Improved.” Yet, Marvin would be quite right to believe that someone created this utterance so

as to have an effect on an audience (and, in fact, by purchasing the cookies Marvin, presumably, succumbed to that intended effect). This anecdote suggests that people quite regularly act on the valid assumption that a language token appropriately bears intentions without, at the same time, having a precise model of whose intentions it bears. This experience is particularly true of texts: Our lives are filled with signs that guide our behavior without any manifest author.

What this suggests is that the whole issue of whether readers attribute intentions to an author, narrator, implied author, or any fully realized intentional agent is not particularly important. Rather, readers do what they do quite regularly: They create representations that incorporate the assumption that the utterances that constitute a literary (or other) text were formed with specific intentions. They need not feel compelled to attribute those intentions to some unique construction such as “the author” or “the narrator.”

Curiously, despite the rest of their analysis, this is a point with which Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) seemed to concur. Late in their article they stated that “readers generally process text, including literature, *as if it were communication* [italics added] (p. 22). If, as Dixon and Bortolussi appeared to agree, readers are processing texts as if each utterance carries ordinary intentions, then why make the claim that “text is not communication”? We are led to ask once again about the implications of this view for processes and representations. If readers do indeed process texts as communication, then is it not reasonable to expect conversations and texts to engage similar processes and representations? What, then, is gained by Dixon and Bortolussi’s analysis?

Let us attempt an answer to that question: We believe that Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) made a valid observation about the way in which theorists of text processing have written about “the recovery of the author’s intentions.” Dixon and Bortolussi were quite right to argue that most readers at most times are not particularly concerned about the intentions of the historical author and that analysis of the actual author’s intentions is not a necessary step for understanding text processing. Even those readers who indeed are concerned about historical authors are likely addressing those concerns effortfully rather than as an ordinary aspect of moment-by-moment reading. What Dixon and Bortolussi reminded us is that when we wish to speak of “the author’s intentions,” we need take care to define the exact scope of this claim. An improved formulation of text theorists’ standard claim, therefore, might go something like this: Readers normally process literary texts (and other written texts) against the assumption that they are recovering some set of intended meanings. This formulation captures the important aspects of text processing without making the (admittedly common) mistake of claiming that readers necessarily work toward recovering a historical author’s original intentions.

To conclude, we remain unconvinced by the argument that “text is not communication.” Dixon and Bortolussi (2001) made a distinction between “communication” and “not communication” that does not seem to capture real-world variation

in instances of language use. Moreover, they failed to provide evidence that their distinction has any consequences for processes or representations. Without a careful exploration of those consequences, it is difficult to see the benefits of making such a distinction in the first place. However, we believe that Dixon and Bortolussi's arguments may have lasting value by calling attention to theorists' imprecision in the manner in which they have discussed exactly what intentions readers attempt to recover as they experience texts.

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