Message Design Logics Theory

And

Messaging in the Ebola Crisis

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Human beings design messages to reach receivers in many ways. Message design logics theory poses three fundamental ways senders construct messages to receivers (O’Keefe, 1987). If communication is used to persuade, the complexity of a sender’s message depends upon the cognitive capability of the sender. This paper will explain the theory of message design logics in detail, covering the three types of message design logics. It will then follow the history and development from the birth in the 1980’s to current day. Finally the paper will apply the theory to a current example of persuasion such as communication in the Ebola crisis and critique it.

Barbara O’Keefe, the author of the theory, divides message complexity into three types: expressive design logic, conventional design logic, and rhetorical design logic (O’Keefe, 1988). The first, expressive design logic, is the most basic and focuses on expressing individual thoughts and opinions (O’Keefe, 1988). This type of message design merely states what the persuader wants. The second, conventional design logic, is described as “a game played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures” (O’Keefe, 1988, p.86). This type of design logic appeals to typical reasons or emotional appeals that would be suitable for any audience. The third, rhetorical message design logic, is the most complex and sophisticated message design focusing on achieving an agreement between the sender and receiver in which the message provides context. Unlike conventional design logic (O’Keefe, 1988), the rhetorical message design logic is adapted to the particular audience being addressed.

Expressive design logic is the simplest form of message design and only focuses on expression of thoughts.. When constructing this type of message, the sender does not adapt to the receiver. The message is focused around the sender’s goals, opinions, and thoughts. Messages in this category are often threats, repetition of information, and complaints about situation the receiver has no control over (O’Keefe, 1988). The sender often sounds like a small child when using this type of message design logic, simply reacting to previous messages or current environments. “It’s hot,” “I want that dog,” or “Don’t even think about it,” are all messages constructed using expressive design logic.

Conventional design logic is more complex and considers the receiver’s thoughts and opinions. During a communication using this design logic, a sender and receiver will negotiate a shared meaning using a given context. The context is dictated by social standards and rules that apply to typical social situations (O’Keefe, 1988). Messages usually follow those of John Searle’s speech acts: utterance act, propositional act, illocutionary act, or perlocutionary act (Searle, 1969). These messages demonstrate that the sender and receiver are able to recognize social rules and standards, and, because of this, statements can be somewhat predictable.

“I want that dog,” (expressive).

“No.”  
 “But I will take care of it,” (conventional).

The third statement demonstrates knowledge that social convention dictates that there is some sort of rebuttal when a request is denied (Searle, 1969). The sender also demonstrates knowledge that someone must take care of the dog and is trying to achieve a goal through cooperatively playing a game with the receiver, presumably his or her mother. The rebuttal is a general one that acknowledges typical objections someone might make to a request to keep a dog.

The most complicated of the three message design logics is rhetorical. The sophistication of rhetorical messages is high and is demonstrated through the sender’s and receiver’s ability to negotiate meaning without focusing on a given context; the conversation is created together (O’Keefe, 1988). The goal of persuasion is much more likely to be accomplished when the sender uses rhetorical message design logics. Since there is no given context or social rules and norms, the sender and receiver create context through messages within the conversation. “In the conventional view, context is given and the relevant features of the context anchor meaning; in the rhetorical view, ‘context’ is created by the message, or at least by the process of communication, and only the interactionally achieved ‘architecture of intersubjectivity’ . . . anchors meaning” (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 87). The context of a rhetorical message is created in real-time, allowing greater freedom and sophistication when attempting to communicate or persuade. Using the example conversation from earlier:  
 “I want that dog” (expressive).

“No.”  
 “But I will take care of it” (conventional).

“No.”  
“But it will make a great guard dog. Think of how much safer you’ll feel when you’re at home by yourself if you have a dog in the house.” (rhetorical).

The last statement gives meaning to conversation by demonstrating the value of the dog to the particular receiver by demonstrating knowledge of the receiver’s beliefs and values. Now the conversation isn’t focused on the sender’s wants, but on the receiver’s needs. The receiver might give in this time.

In 1982 O’Keefe began researching the theory with her mentor, Jesse Delia, a leading proponent of constructivist communication theory. In this study O’Keefe and Delia claim that how much a message addresses multiple goals is the most important concept in distinguishing the sophistication of messages (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982). They point out that messages can be multifaceted and multifunctional, and that, since this is the case, the sophistication of a message can be ranked in a hierarchical fashion

O’Keefe then conducted research to define these hierarchical categories for messages. In 1987, O’Keefe and Shepherd published a study outlining a system for analysis of messages in face-to-face persuasive conversations and explaining how the messages achieve the goal of multiple objectives

However, the theory of message design logics was not formally published until a year later. Using a group of 97 undergraduate participants from a large Midwestern university enrolled in introductory communication classes, O’Keefe (1988) studied their reactions to messages constructed using different design logics. The participants were asked to respond to a hypothetical situation. In the hypothetical situation the participant was part of a group for a class project in which the project grade heavily influenced the final grade. In the group there was a member, Ron, who did little work and often had problems attending the group meetings. Shortly before the final meeting for which all the work was to be completed, Ron called the participant and explained that he did not have his portion of the project done. Participants were then asked to respond to the hypothetical situation by writing what they would say to Ron. The participants were asked to write exactly what they would say rather than a general overview of their feelings and response (O’Keefe, 1988).

O’Keefe then categorized the responses by message design logic (expressive, conventional, or rhetorical) and by the goal structure attempted in the message (minimal, unifunctional, multifunctional). She found that rhetorical messages were much more likely to be used by women than by men; 24 female participants used rhetorical message structure compared to six male participants. However, there was no significant relationship between gender and message goal structure. O’Keefe also found that conventional message structure was used most often; 23 female participants and 19 male participants used conventional message design logics for a total of 42 participants (O’Keefe, 1988).

In 1996 Peterson and Albrecht used message design logics theory to study the message construction of conversations between superiors and subordinates. Peterson and Albrecht extended an earlier study that indicated supportive communication can dissipate a negative environment in a mixed-status relationship such as the one between and employee and employer (Albrecht & Halsey, 1992). Peterson and Albrecht used the prior study to look at the message construction between superiors and subordinates. Data were collected from nurses working at a Southeastern hospital who volunteered to participate in the study. The staff nurses (SNs) and nurse managers (NMs) were asked to complete a questionnaire about his or her relationship with a superior or subordinate. The SNs and NMs were asked to respond to a hypothetical situation much like the participants from O’Keefe’s 1988 study involving the group member “Ron.” The hypothetical situations were designed to be as close as possible to a situation that might exist in the hospital environment (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996).

52 paragraph responses were analyzed from the participants, the average length being 2.5 sentences. The responses were categorized using the three categories of message design logics. Then the participants were asked about their feelings about messages received from a hypothetical subordinate or superior. Peterson and Albrecht found that relationships between SNs and NMs were considered more positive when an NM used rhetorical messages rather than any other design (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996).

Other studies of message design logics have also taken place in healthcare settings. In 2008 Caughlin, Brashers, Ramey, Kosenko, Donovan-Kicken, and Bute studied the message design logics of responses to HIV disclosures. In this study 581 students at a large Midwestern university were asked to participate in a study in which they hypothetically had a sibling who was disclosing the sibling’s HIV positive diagnosis. The participants were given a questionnaire that included one of 24 HIV positive disclosures and were asked to write down exactly what their response would be to that disclosure. The 24 disclosures fell into six categories that could be described using one of the message design logics (Caughlin et al., 2008). Of the 581 participants, 539 completed the response. Their responses were then sorted into the three message design logic categories. Conventional message design was most common among both male and female participants: 118 male participants and 176 female participants used conventional message design logic for a total of 294 participants. More female participants than male participants used rhetorical message design logics, but not by a significant number: 35 female participants and 31 male participants used rhetorical message design logics for a total of 66 (Caughlin et al., 2008). Expressive messages were the most negative, often blaming the sibling for the HIV infection. Conventional messages were often a baseline for socially normative behavior and included predicable messages such as, “How are you doing emotionally with this news?” (Caughlin et al., 2008, p. 667) Rhetorical messages were indeed the most sophisticated and expressed more ‘we’ type messages such as “remember, we are a family” than the other types of messages (Caughlin et al., 2008, p. 668).

Caughlin also applied message design logics theory to another type of disclosure. In 2013 Scott, Caughlin, Donovan-Kicken, and Mikucki-Enyart conducted a study focused on disclosure of a depression diagnosis to a friend. The authors studied 504 students from a large Midwestern university enrolled in communication courses who volunteered as participants. Participants filled out an online questionnaire with an open-ended question asking them to respond to a close friend’s disclosing a depression diagnosis. The disclosure messages were 1 of 20, all falling into one of the message design logic categories. The participants were asked to write down exactly what they would say in response to the disclosure. Like the previous study (Caughlin et al., 2008), expressive messages were the most negative, including responses such as, “Dude, you don’t have depression” (Scott et al., 2013, p. 147). Conventional message responses again reflected social norms and were predictable responses, such as, “Is there anything I can do to help?” (Scott et al., 2013, p. 147). Rhetorical messages showed ‘we’ indicators and signs of support such as, “We will get through this” (Scott et al., 2013, p. 147).

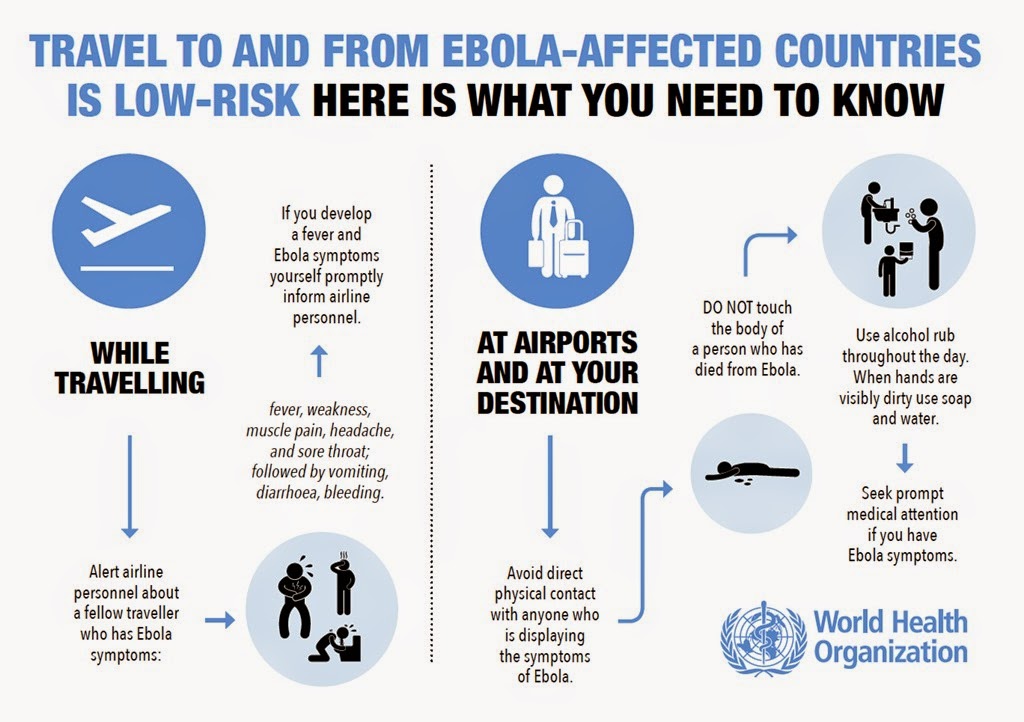
Message design logics theory has been studied across many contexts because the theory effectively explains the effectiveness of many persuasive messages. In both of the studies dealing with disclosure of a medical condition expressive message designs were the most negative. This is partially because expressive messages simply express a sender’s immediate thoughts. They are often not effective persuasion techniques and are often poorly received (Caughlin et al., 2008). Since messages using conventional design logic are dictated by a given context within social norms, these messages fall into certain patterns, such as offering help during a medical situation (Scott et al., 2013). Being the most sophisticated, rhetorically designed messages often have the greatest impact and most positive response; because of their high degree of sophistication, receivers are often persuaded by senders using this message design (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996).

Message design logics also explains communication between a sender and receiver very well. When experimenters study relationships between subordinates and superiors, they find that positive relationships often have superiors using rhetorical message structures and relationships that are negative have superiors using expressive message structures (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996). The theory explains that the positive relationships are so because subordinates feel their concerns are heard, validated and have a high degree of trust in and vested in them by their superiors (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996).

The theory also describes communication as “multifunctional” (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982, p. 66) and explains that communication is often used to accomplish a variety of goals. Expressive messages reflect communication aimed at accomplishing a singular goal. Conventional messages can be aimed at accomplishing several goals but only within a given socially normative context, and rhetorical messages can accomplish a multitude of goals by creating a shared context through the messages passed between the sender and receiver (O’Keefe & Shepherd, 1987).

The theory itself is testable; there are situations in which it could be falsified. Since it posits that expressive designs are the least persuasive and rhetorical designs are the most persuasive (O’Keefe, 1988), if a study were conducted in which the participants found expressive messages the most persuasive and rhetorical messages the least persuasive, then the theory would be disconfirmed. For example, a hypothetical study is conducted in which parents are asked about their response to a child’s request for a dog The parents are shown messages from the three types of design logics and then asked which they find most convincing to persuade them to allow the child to have a dog. If the majority of participants found the expressive messages most convincing and the rhetorical messages less so, then the theory would be falsified.

For a contemporary application, the Ebola crisis in West Africa is a perfect example. Currently, healthcare organizations and the general public struggle with communication that is cooperative as opposed to antagonistic. Designing a message or a few messages with message design logics could increase the effective communication of both parties. Below is a message released by the World Health Organization (WHO).



If Message Design Logics Theory is used to examine this public service announcement from the WHO you can see all three types of messages used, expressive, conventional, and rhetorical. The images used are basic and reach the largest demographics. Literacy is not necessary and the images communicate basic ideas such as “traveling” and “sick.” The flow chart structure also lends itself to basic understanding of the message. The text used is also very simple, however it can be classified as conventional messaging. Messages like “Seek prompt medical attention” are very direct and do not display much social convention, but instead show expressive construction. Other messages, like the man wearing the tie and carrying luggage, do show some awareness of social convention. In this case the fact that many travelers travel for business. The message, while recognizing that some travelers are doing so for business, says that Ebola can still infect you. It recognizes the belief that Ebola is a “poor peoples’ disease” but breaks down that belief with the image of a suit.

The message above does not show much Rhetorical design. There is very little back and forth communication between the sender, the WHO, and the receiver, the traveler. It brings into question the effectiveness of the message as a whole. As mentioned earlier in the paper rhetorical message design is the most effective form of the three. Perhaps adding another piece to this message would be beneficial in solidifying the communication between the healthcare workers and the general public. Adding blurb such as “Protect you and your loved ones, help stop Ebola” could entice some receivers to understand that the actions taken in stopping Ebola could help themselves and their family as opposed to an unknown public. Much like the example earlier in the paper where the child asks his mother for a dog, this message would demonstrate knowledge of the receiver’s values.

This is just one example of how message design logics theory is extraordinarily useful in everyday life. It has been shown to have positive implications for work relationships when rhetorical message designs are used (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996). Messages viewed as positive in medical diagnosis disclosures often use conventional or rhetorical message designs (Caughlin et al., 2008; Scott et al. 2013) Academic administrators could use this theory to better understand why certain students may have a stronger attraction to certain material or certain classes, depending on what type of message constructs the professor teaching the class is using. The theory could also be used in political persuasion and diplomatic relations and public health communication. It explains, describes, and predicts behavior extremely well.

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