The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?

This paper by Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch was a very difficult paper to understand but gives a different perspective to the larger picture of communication. In fact, reading it helped me appreciate the complexity of human language and expression. No wonder collaboration and communication have always been areas of interest for research. There are so many critical but unanswered questions still out there about the basic facility of language.

The authors tried to analyze the faculty of language through both a quantitative and qualitative basis. Admittedly, the abstract definitions of FLB and FLN were really difficult for me to swallow. From what I understood, FLB is the broad faculty of language, particularly differentiated by a biological capacity that allows humans to master human language without explicit instruction. FNB, on the other hand, is a narrow faculty of language, an even more abstract linguistic computational system. What makes humans unique is the FLN and its core property of recursion. On the biological side, there are factors that limit the infinite capacity of the FLN including the lung capacity and working memory. However, essentially the FLN can process infinitely complex sentences. That point was reiterated constantly in the paper was the theory that animal communication lacks the rich, expressive and open-ended power of human language. When compared to animal capabilities in speech perception, imitation, and modality learning, it seems that humans have more potential.

To make connections between humans and animals, the bird song was also used a lot in this paper. Conceptualizing song as an analogy to language was an interesting twist. I never knew that the song birds sang needed to be learned so specifically. Songbirds learn species-specific song by listening to con-specifics. Like adults have difficulty learning a new language, birds can produce defective songs that cannot be corrected when they mature. Also, there is the “blabbing” effect in infants that can be extended to how young birds try to sing amorphous versions of adult songs. The linkages between humans and animals were useful in seeing that humans are not the only ones that develop when among vertebrates.

On a separate note about language, in my East Asian Language and Culture class, we’re learning the philosophical aspect of language. It makes the whole picture even more complicated. Chinese philosophers had a concept of the “language trap.” Whereas by using words, we are also limiting our own expressiveness by the concepts we attach with the words. This may, in effect, limit the otherwise limitless quality of language itself.
Social Catalysts

Professor Karahalios wrote her dissertation on social catalysts in audio-video communication links between remote spaces. These social catalysts nearly had a heart attack when I saw it was 108 pages. Social catalysts, as defined by this dissertation, help encourage new interactions between people within two spaces. Karahalios used her own cat as an example of a catalyst. Without him, she wouldn’t have met many labmates, sponsors, and friends. These catalysts essentially provide an ice-breaker to help lower barriers to communication. This may result in new relationships that may not have otherwise formed in the traditional social setting.

The introduction made me nostalgic as it went through the history of communication. Electronic media has come so far, but the resulting changes have left a feeling of disassociation between physical and social space. There is a wealth of examples that Karahalios uses that attempt to utilize electronic media for social communication. However, the tone of the paper reminded me that the concept of “social visualization” to bridge that gap again is a relatively new and growing research field. Many expectations of media have not been met and the design of new spaces must be developed. Although there are no textbooks on the matter, this dissertation can serve that void.

One visualization that the dissertation focused on is called Visiphone. The physical dome showed spiraling dots that show data from audio. It is a social catalyst in many different ways. The dome view drew people to surround it, especially since the spiral was visible from many angles. Also, the “mesmerizing” feel of the visualization helped calm people in the environment which kept them near the dome for a good amount of time. Perhaps one of the most important catalysts is revelation. Through Visiphone, a person can evaluate his or her behavior and dominance in the conversation. This may help them to realize something that they would not have normally noticed in the conversation. When people learn more about themselves, they continue to be interested. These catalysts are points where conversation can enter and the people surrounding the dome can socialize.

Honestly, just skimming through the rest of it, the dissertation could have been used as text or additional reading for the class. Many different aspects of visualization were addressed, such as the temporal and aesthetic considerations. We saw many examples in this class but rarely consider the finer details in a visualization and do not have a framework that would allow us to have a process in creating one. Maybe for future classes, a text such as this could be used as a supplement to the research papers.
Completely agree and the findings don’t surprise me. I need and WANT to groom my friends list but unfortunately by now, I barely remember some people and why I’m associated with them. Because of this, the utility of having “friends” on Facebook is considerably less. And yes, I do only have 5, count them 5, real close friends that I can divulge my struggles and triumphs with – without fearing the repercussions of non-regular communication.

The statistics comparing the behavior of men and women were also interesting. I suppose I fit the female average – I roughly talk to about 6 people regularly. It would seem that men socialize a lot less than women, but that may not be necessarily true. This type of online socialization can only be given credit as one type of social space. Also, I do have over 500+ friends, and tend to message only a few people. However, recently, I’ve been trying to push myself to get back in contact with more people, at the very least, on their birthdays.

Facebook has turned into more of a way to “broadcast” life. That may not be such a bad thing. This may be, in fact, a social catalyst that allows two people to grow closer due to a certain instance of “broadcasting” that would have never occurred without Facebook. Also, it has allowed me to at the very least, maintain friendships with people who may have. These weak ties allow me to expand my network into multiple different groups, which, in a past research paper, is key to distribution of information. It is a big disheartening to know that mutual, reciprocal communication is so difficult to maintain with large amount of people. That was my original intent of using Facebook in the first place.

Of course, I should have realized that Facebook and other researchers have been trying to look into the dynamics of relationships on this medium for a long time now. It’s funny, actually, now that they’ve (again) changed the layout based on the data they’ve collected and knowledge they have about communication on Facebook, people are still complaining about the changes. I say let’s just leave it to them.