Communication Theories, Missiology and Music

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS .................................................................................................... ii  
TABLE OF FIGURES ....................................................................................................... iii  
INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 1  
COMMUNICATION THEORIES ..................................................................................... 2  
- Code Theory .................................................................................................................... 2  
  - Traditional Models ........................................................................................................ 2  
  - The Role of Meaning ..................................................................................................... 5  
- Relevance Theory .......................................................................................................... 7  
  - Cognitive Environment .................................................................................................. 8  
  - Context ........................................................................................................................... 9  
  - Intention .......................................................................................................................... 10  
  - The Communication Process ....................................................................................... 11  
- Code Theory, Relevance Theory and Music .................................................................. 14  
  - Integrating the Two Models .......................................................................................... 16  
THE MISSIOLOGICAL BIAS ......................................................................................... 18  
  - Shaw and Van Engen ...................................................................................................... 18  
  - Cross-Cultural Communication ..................................................................................... 18  
  - God Accommodates to Communicate ......................................................................... 21  
  - Missiological Communication ....................................................................................... 23  
  - “Shortening the Chain” .................................................................................................. 27  
  - Revelation Dynamic ........................................................................................................ 27  
SOME IMPLICATIONS .................................................................................................... 29  
  - The Purpose of Communication .................................................................................... 29  
  - Communicating the Gospel Message ............................................................................ 29  
  - Informing versus Communicating ................................................................................ 30  
COMMUNICATION AND MUSIC .................................................................................. 32  
  - Applying Code Theory to Musical Performance ........................................................... 32  
  - Apply Relevance Theory to Musical Performance ......................................................... 33  
COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL THROUGH MUSIC ................................................. 35  
  - A Biblical Song ............................................................................................................... 35  
  - A Contemporary Song .................................................................................................... 37  
SPIRITUAL COMMUNICATION .................................................................................... 40  
  - Karen Kuchan ................................................................................................................ 40  
  - Communication Biases .................................................................................................. 42  
CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION .............................................................................. 45  
REFERENCES CITED ..................................................................................................... 46
TABLE OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Communication Model of Shannon and Weaver</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A Basic Communication Model</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hiebert’s Model of Interaction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Message without communication</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ineffective communication</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Effective communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Hill’s Quadrant</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rogers’ Integration Model</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Communication and Cultures</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Accommodation in Relevance Theory</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Accommodating to another culture</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Missionary as a Communicator</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Missionary as a Facilitator</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Revelation Dynamic</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>King’s Model of Music Communication</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Communication Triad during the Worship Music</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The Data Box Applied to Communication</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this tutorial is to explore how communication theory relates to music. The main question I will be pursuing is: “How does music communicate?” First I will discuss code theory, which has been a traditional model for communication. Then I will examine communication from the bias of relevance theory, which has been more recently proposed. Once these two biases are defined and explained, I will discuss communication from a missiological bias. This deals with inter-cultural communication and the Christian task of relating God’s message to others. Finally I will apply these three biases to music. The result will be a combination of communication theory, Missiology, and ethnomusicology and how to use this combination to do my research on “The Role of Song in Christian Discipleship.”
COMMUNICATION THEORIES

Code theory and relevance theory have often been viewed as contradictory, but a closer examination will reveal that they are complementary and can be incorporated to form a single communication model.

Code Theory

I will first examine some of the models of communication and then enter into a discussion of the importance of the role of meaning in communication.

Traditional Models

Code theory has been the traditional model for studying communication. Shannon and Weaver are credited with developing the basic model used much even today (Shannon 1949:5). They developed their model from a mathematical perspective applied to the telegraph. Figure 1 illustrates their model. It is interesting to note that their model does not include encoding, nor feedback, which were soon to be added.

![Communication Model of Shannon and Weaver](image)

Figure 1: The Communication Model of Shannon and Weaver

From Shannon and Weaver, code theory has developed into a generally used model, which may be described as follows. The central idea of code theory is the
transmission of a message. The message requires someone to send it, and another person to receive it. The message must be encoded into some symbolic form, whether this be spoken words, electric signals, gestures, or written words. The receiver must then decode the symbols in order to understand the message. The message can be transmitted through various channels, and its transmission can be affected by noise. The basic model is illustrated in Figure 2, and is often represented by the symbols: “S-M-R” which stand for “sender,” “message,” and “receiver” (Schramm 1963:7); (Nida 1960:47).

![Figure 2: A Basic Communication Model](image)

Others, such as King, have emphasized the aspect of feedback, since the receiver can respond to the message and by sending another to the sender, especially in a musical performance (King 1989:60). Others have proposed that each person is both a sender and receiver simultaneously (Kraft 1978:82), creating a model of interactive communication (Hiebert 1985:166). See figure 3.
And others have detailed the different channels through which the message may be sent. Berlo details five channels, which correspond to the five human senses (Berlo 1960:32), but Smith expands the list to twelve signal systems: verbal, written, numeric, pictorial, audio, artifactual, kinesic, optical, tactile, spatial, temporal, and olfactory (Smith 1992:163).

The S-M-R model remains the basis for communication theory today. It is hard to deny from personal experience that a person says something, someone else hears what is said, and a message has been sent from sender to receiver. But the question is: “Is the meaning in the message, in the symbols that are sent?” The answer has traditionally been “yes.” Therefore much effort has been spent on analyzing language and how people use words to communicate with each other.

But, this logic breaks down in the following scenario: Mike says to Bill, “Are you going tonight?” Bill replies, “Yes.” But Bill thought Mike was referring to a concert, when Mike was thinking about a ball game. Was a message sent and received? Yes. But

Figure 3: Hiebert’s Model of Interaction
the received message does not match the sent message. What happened? Sperber contends that the meaning is not in the message (Sperber 1986:23). But he was not the first.

*The Role of Meaning*

Many communication theorists have proposed that in the communication process the message does not contain the meaning. This is a fundamental shift in communication theory where it was assumed that the message carried the meaning. But that assumption began to be challenged.

Berlo, one of the early communication theorists, built on the model of Shannon and Weaver, but with a profound difference: meaning is not in the message, but in the person (Berlo 1960:175). When persons share similar meanings they can communicate more easily. What this means is that the same message may not communicate the same thing to two persons. Each will give it their own interpretation and meaning.

Kraft follows this same train of thought: “Meaning is the creation of the receptor” (Kraft 1991:77). This implies that meaning is not even transferred, but people create meaning themselves. Alaichamy states it well:

“In human communication, meaning is not transferred from one end to the other end as in telecommunication. Instead, meaning is created in the minds of the receptors during the process of communication. Human communication is a process of meaning creation, not meaning transference” (Alaichamy 1997:56).

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1 “Messages can be transmitted from one person to another, but meanings cannot” (Gudykunst 2003:6).
This has significant implications for communication theory, especially for missionaries:

“The understanding that what messages mean is constructed by the receiver rather than inherent in the message is perhaps the single most threatening insight of contemporary communication theory for Christian communicators” (Kraft 1991:92).

And thus Kraft advocates that the communicator must take into account the receptor of the message even more than the message itself.

All of these theorists lay the groundwork for the discussion of relevance theory, showing that relevance theory is really not a new idea. I will discuss Sperber in full later, but here are a few previews: Even Donald Smith’s description of BITs is very similar to Sperber’s information processing.

“There is no way to transfer meaning directly from teacher to student, from employer to employee, or from preacher to congregation. Meaning is developed indirectly. The person sending a message can only give information—BITs, Binary information units. The receiver of a message assembles the BIT of that message into a meaning, using a mental model that seems related to the new message” (Smith 1992:64).

The idea of “assembling the BIT” is similar to Sperber’s idea of processing evidence using a particular mental context.

Another example is Nida’s statement: “What does S (the source) want R (the receptor) to understand by M (the message)?” (Nida 1960:84). This is surprising, because the usual question in communication had been “What does the receptor understand in the message?” This sounds a lot like Grice’s original idea, from whom Sperber took his initial idea of meaning. I will discuss this in full later, but now I am point out that the key to our discussion on communication is “meaning.” But first let us describe briefly Relevance Theory.
Relevance Theory

One way to simplify the contrast between code theory and relevance theory is that code theory focuses on *surface-level communication*, and relevance theory seeks to explain *deep-level communication*. This is an over-simplification, but it is useful for beginning the discussion. Another way to see the difference is that code theory comes from a linguistic bias, whereas relevance theory was developed from a psychological bias. The two theories are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

Sperber developed his theory by beginning with an article by Grice which dealt with meaning. Grice’s article is based more on logic and philosophy than anthropology or psychology. But Sperber found it useful as a starting point. Grice’s main thesis is “‘A meant something by x’ is (roughly) equivalent to ‘A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention’” (Grice 1957:385). Sperber uses this to establish his bias: the importance of recognizing the intention of the communicator. This is done by inference. He argues: “Communication is successful not when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker's 'meaning' of it” (Sperber 1986:23).

Sperber asked the question of where the meaning lay in communication. Was the meaning in the sender, the message, and/or the receiver? He begins by arguing that the encoding-decoding process has yet to be explained. What are the rules one uses for decoding a message? Sperber states that there are no rules, but that the receiver uses a completely different process in communication.2

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2 This is similar to the argument between Goodenough and Geertz on cultures. Goodenough argues that culture exists in the mind and consists of rules of what is acceptable or not (Goodenough 1957:167). Whereas Geertz argues that culture is public and does not consist of rules, but of meanings which must be uncovered by “thick description” (Geertz 1973:89).
I suggest that new theories arise when one challenges a basic assumption of a traditional theory. In this case, Sperber challenged a basic assumption of traditional communication theory: meaning is encoded and decoded in a message. He proposes a completely different way of looking at communication: meaning is not transferred, but inferred. In fact, he argues, one can infer intention without even using code. Therefore, communication is possible without code (rules or conventions). Coding is part of the evidence; only in inference is meaning created (Sperber 1986:25-26).

The message is not the vehicle for meaning transfer. The message is evidence of the intent of the communicator, but meaning is created by the receiver by inference. In other words, a message is presented from which the receiver derives meaning.

Actually, that is not correct. The receiver infers meaning based on what he or she already knows. The receptor chooses some of what he or she already knows to process new evidence and create meaning from it. The thrust of Sperber’s argument is that meaning is not transferred, but that the sender seeks to modify the “Cognitive Environment” of the receiver, and in the process the cognitive environment of the sender is also modified. This needs to be explained in more detail.

**Cognitive Environment**

Let us begin by talking about a person’s knowledge. What we know consists of all of our experiences, plus our interpretation of those experiences. Sperber refers to this as our “cognitive environment” which includes not only what we presently know, but all that we could possibly come to know. Knowledge is not “facts,” but our beliefs and assumptions about our experiences. I have previously written in my second tutorial about
how we order our world to make sense of it. We create our own perception of the world and our beliefs about it. Berlo says we structure our reality into theories (Berlo 1960:25). When someone says something to me, I have to “reconcile” that message with how I see my world. I can reject it, accept it, or modify it, but sooner or later I have to relate it to my perception of the world.

Sperber bases his model of communication on this concept of the cognitive environment of every individual. Communication is an attempt to modify the cognitive environment of another person (Sperber 1986:150). This is transformational in how we as Christians view evangelism. I will discuss this later.

Allow me to modify my previous example. Suppose Mike says to Bill, “Are you going tonight?” and Bill answers, “I’ve had a long day.” What are some of the possible interpretations of this conversation? We do not know to where Mike is referring. Nor do we know if Bill’s reply is “Yes” or “No.” If the meaning were totally in the message, we should be able to know where Mike is going, and whether Bill will accompany him. But we are unable to decipher this from the messages sent. Therefore, the meaning must lie elsewhere. Sperber proposes that meaning lies in the context. This is a different connotation of the word “context” as used by Kraft, who uses the word “context” to refer to the external circumstances (Kraft 1991:132). Sperber uses the word to describe a group of mental assumptions.

**Context**

What exactly is “context?” In simple terms, context is the set of assumptions or beliefs one uses to process the message and decide on a meaning. Sperber argues that we
cannot use all of our cognitive environment to analysis every message we receive. That would be too laborious. We choose some of what we know in order to process the message and make it meaningful. That “something we choose” is the “context.” Sperber argues that we will choose the context that we feel is most relevant in order to process the message (Sperber 1986:141). We will not use everything we know to process every message.

Now let us return to the sender. According to Sperber’s view of communication, the sender must know a possible context that the receiver will use to process the message in order for the sender (her) to communicate with the receiver (him). (For the rest of this paper, I will adopt Sperber’s convention of referring to the sender as “she,” and to the receiver as “he.”) In order words, she must know what context he will use to process her message in order to communicate effectively with him.

*Intention*

To complete this description, I must add one more concept, that of “intention.” Sperber adds that communication only takes place when both the sender and the receiver are conscious that she wants to communicate with him. It is not enough for her send a message, but he must also realize that she is sending a message. She must also establish that he realizes that she wants to send a message. If only the sender is conscious of the attempt to communicate, but not the receiver, Sperber refers to this as “informing, but not communicating.” This has tremendous implications for evangelism, which I will discuss later in this paper.
The Communication Process

Allow me to illustrate these concepts with a few diagrams. I will use a circle to represent the cognitive environment of an individual. For communication to take place, the cognitive environments of two individuals must overlap at least to some degree. The message lies in that overlap. Here we must change our vocabulary to that of Sperber. A message is not sent, but “evidence is displayed.” It is the receiver’s task to make a conclusion from that evidence.

The Process of Communication (Relevance Theory)

Non-ostensive: no intent to communicate, although a message is present.

Figure 4: Message without communication

For communication to take place, the communicator must have an intent to communicate, and the receiver must recognize that intent. This is Sperber’s emphasis. In our daily lives, many messages are sent, both verbal and non-verbal, but communication does not occur unless the intent is present and recognized. In figure 4, the communicator has “sent a message” (evidence), and the receiver is conscious of the phenomenon, but
since he didn’t recognize any intent to communicate, he did not process the message. In a busy city street, one sees much movement, and hears many sounds, but one does not (and cannot) process them all. A person will only process those phenomena he or she perceives as “an intent to communicate.”

Now let us examine the communication process adding the concept of context. (Here I will assume the intent to communicate is recognized.) The communicator produces “evidence” with a specific intention, that of modifying the receiver’s cognitive environment. The receiver “infers” from the evidence, using the context most relevant in order to process the evidence. (See figure 5.) I propose that if the context the communicator is intending for the evidence is different from the context the receiver uses to process it, communication is ineffective. Let us return to our example.

Mike asks Bill, “Are you going tonight?” The context Mike has in mind is a concert, but Bill immediately thinks of a ballgame. Evidence was produced, both were
conscious of an attempt at communication, but Bill’s conclusion was very different from Mike’s intention. We could call this “misinterpretation.”

I continue to propose that if the two share similar contexts, communication is more effective. If both of them enjoy concerts, frequently attend concerts, and never go to a game, the question “Are you going tonight?” is immediately processed in the context of a concert. Bill would conclude that Mike is talking about a concert which is what Mike intended to communicate. (See Figure 6.)

![The Process of Communication (Relevance Theory)](image)

Improved communication: the contexts are similar.

Figure 6: Effective communication

This is the most simple form of Sperber’s model. Communication is rarely so simple. If we add Bill’s reply, “I’ve had a long day,” the receiver has become the communicator and the communicator the receiver, who must now infer from what Bill has said. Again, context plays the key role. “I’ve had a long day” could mean that Bill wants to stay home to rest or it could mean that Bill wants to get out and relax. No
amount of decoding the message will distinguish the difference. Only context will. Even though the receiver may not give the message the same meaning as the sender intended, it is the chosen context of each person that determines the meaning, not the message itself.

Hill developed this idea in her thesis on Bible translation, using a quadrant based on shared cognitive environments (Hill 2002:450). These environments can be shared, believed to be shared, or not actually shared. (See Figure 7.) Communication is most effective when cognitive environments are shared; less effective when actually shared, but not believed to be shared, or believed to be share, but not actually shared, and non-effective when neither actually share. I find this very useful for dealing with how to improve communication, although I would suggest using the concept of context rather than cognitive environment. Sperber’s emphasis is that we do not use our whole cognitive environment to process new information only a context which is a subset of our cognitive environment (Sperber 1986:141).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actually Shared</th>
<th>Think it is shared</th>
<th>Quadrant 1: Shared and believed to be shared.</th>
<th>Quadrant 2: Shared but not believed to be shared.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>⊥</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Quadrant 3: Not shared but believed to be shared.</td>
<td>Quadrant 4: Not shared and not believed to be shared.</td>
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Figure 7: Hill’s Quadrant

Code Theory, Relevance Theory and Music

Sperber is very clear about code theory. Spoken language is the most effective, explicit communication. Since language is explicit, code theory works very well to
explain verbal communication. But much of communication is implicit, especially non-verbal communication. How is it that a wink of an eye can communicate so much? This is where relevance theory proves strong in its ability to explain communication, especially non-verbal communication. I think this is especially important for studying how music communicates, for much of music is non-verbal. Sperber points out that “most communication theory is built on the assumption that what is communicated are propositions” (Sperber 1986:57). Most theories do not talk about the communication of images, impressions, or emotions. This may be why music as communication doesn’t fit into the usual theories.

Ethnomusicologists, having been heavily influenced by linguistics, have spent much effort analyzing song texts for their communicative content. The words of the song contain the explicit communication, but what about the rest of the song, the musical style, the rhythm, the musicians, what people associate the music with? Code theory can do little to answer this, but relevance theory can be of great help. What meanings are people giving to the music and why? Relevance theory provokes us to study their cognitive environments and discover which contexts they are using to process the music. This is why Titon states that one cannot understand a people’s music without experiencing it (Titon 1997:94). I interpret Titon to be trying to understand another people’s cognitive environment by spending time with them.

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3 This is an allusion to an illustration used by Geertz to discuss non-verbal communication and the meanings inferred from it. He advocates “thick-description” to uncover the layers of meaning in a culture. (Geertz 1973:6) Could communication be seen as “layers of meaning?”
Integrating the Two Models

I am fascinated by Rogers integration of code theory and relevance theory into a single communication model. (See figure 8.) He illustrates how the two theories complement each other and add to our understanding of the communication process. In his diagram, the communicator encodes and sends a message, which is decoded by a receptor (Rogers 2002:55). But to this Rogers adds insights from relevance theory. The second step in the process is “C evaluates R with view to enhanced encoding.” This is when the communicator is choosing a context that she knows the receptor (he) holds.

Figure 8: Rogers’ Integration Model
In the fourth step, Rogers emphasizes the importance of “intent” in the role of communication. A message sent without mutual recognition of intent is merely informing, not communicating.

On the receptors part, he decodes the message, and then determines in which context to process the message. Note that, according to Rogers, and as I have previously discussed, the receptor attaches meaning, which he himself has created, to the symbols which he has decoded from the message.

In the last step, communication is evaluated to be successful if the created meaning is similar to the intended meaning. According to Sperber, “similar” is subjective, for communication lies on a continuum from precise to vague. Most communication results in something in-between: “We might think of communication itself, then as a matter of degree” (Sperber 1986:59).

Rogers has done an excellent job of giving us a model for both the surface-level, explicit communication, discussed by code theory and its deep structure, implicit element, explained by relevance theory. Before I apply this to music, I need to discuss the missiological bias of communication.
THE MISSIOLOGICAL BIAS

So far, I have discussed communication as a sender and a receiver sharing a message. This has carried two basic assumptions which I will now change: first, the sender and the receiver share much of the same culture, and second, the sender is the originator of the message. The Christian bias changes both assumptions: first, we are called to communicate to people with a culture different from ours, and second, we are ambassadors of a message that originated with God.

Shaw and Van Engen

The following is a discussion of my interpretation of the model presented by Shaw and Van Engen (Shaw 2003:90). I will use different shapes to illustrate different cultures. The choice of each shape purely symbolic. The shape itself has nothing to do with the superiority or inferiority of any culture. In my opinion, worldview is the same as Sperber’s “cognitive environment.” Both are used to describe the assumptions one uses to order his or her own world to be able to function in it.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Let us begin by simplifying communication to be a sender communicating a message with a receiver. (See figure 9.) If the two share the same worldview or cognitive environments, communication will be fairly effective. But if the sender and receiver have very different worldviews, communication will be ineffective until they begin to understand each others worldview and communicate accordingly. I illustrate this by

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4 My use of geometric shapes for cultures and communication coincides with Nida (Nida 1960:47,222) and Kraft (Kraft 1978:98).
drawing the message in the shape of a circle. Cultures that think in a circle perspective will readily send and receive such messages. But if a culture has a square perspective, the message does not coincide with their way of thinking, and they will not understand it.

Usually the missionary learns the language of the people in order to speak to them. This is the basis of code theory: If one can use the same symbols as they do, one will communicate effectively with them.

**Figure 9: Communication and Cultures**

But relevance theory points out that even if a missionary speaks the same language as the people, miscommunication can still be common if they are using very different contexts to process the message. In other words, a missionary has to understand how people think, what contexts they choose, and what are their past and present experiences that form their cognitive environments.
In relevance theory, the message has no “shape.” So figure 9 is not accurate. I propose explaining cross-communication using my previous diagrams. Figures 5 and 6 illustrated the difference between ineffective and effective communication from a relevance theory perspective, but assumed a mono-cultural exchange. For effective communication to take place, the two persons had to share not only a cognitive environment, but certain contexts.

For a communicator to effectively modify the cognitive environment of a receiver who holds a different worldview, she could first modify her own context to that of the receiver’s before attempting the communication. This is illustrated in Figure 10, by the communicator modifying a circular context to a square context within her own cognitive environment. My emphasis here is that the communicator is modifying her own cognitive environment without expecting the receiver to modify his. We can call this “accommodation.”

The Process of Communication (Relevance Theory)

Cross-cultural communication: the communicator uses the receiver’s context.

Figure 10: Accommodation in Relevance Theory
God Accommodates to Communicate

In relevance theory, the two cognitive environments must overlap and share a mutual space. In theology, God entered our cognitive environment, before we could ever enter his. As if God, as a “circle,” became a “square” to “fit into” our mentality. Kraft refers to this as “accommodation” (Kraft 1989:123). God accommodated to our way of thinking so he could communicate with us. “Whenever God decides to connect with human beings God does so in their particularity, on human terms” (Shaw 2003:13). A missionary must do the same with the people to whom he or she goes. If he or she does not accommodate to the people’s culture and worldview, the Gospel message will not be accepted, because it is not relevant. Figure 11 illustrates this.

![Diagram of God Accommodating to Communicate]

Figure 11: Accommodating to another culture
God, represented by a circle, accommodates himself to our worldview, illustrated by a square. The missionary, who holds a square perspective, must try to accommodate his or her worldview to another people’s perspective, which is illustrated by a triangle. If the missionary communicates God from his or her perspective (represented by a square), the people will learn that God is like a square. Since they see things as a triangle, a square God makes no sense to them. Therefore, the God of the missionary is irrelevant to them and they will reject God.

If the missionary is able to communicate God to them as a triangle, which is very different from the missionary’s perspective, the people will see God from a triangle perspective, which is their way of seeing things, and see God as relevant to them.

From the illustration so far, I call your attention to the observation that the missionary sees God as a square, and the people see God as a triangle. The traditional question has been: Who is right? The answer is that God is neither. We can only yet understand him from our own worldview. But we must accept other perspectives of God as valid. We are knowing God from different windows. I discussed this in my previous tutorial. This implies that each culture must develop their own theology. If they import a theology from another culture, God will appear as irrelevant to them.

The main argument of Shaw and Van Engen is that the missionary must be able to recognize his or her own worldview, and as much as possible, not let it interfere with the Gospel message. In other words, the missionary must accommodate the Gospel message to the worldview of the people to whom he or she goes. This is not easy. Even in the previous example, the missionary has to work with two worldviews, his or her own, and that of the people.
Missiological Communication

Shaw and Van Engen take this one step further. I will illustrate this by using two diagrams. The first one is a stepping stone to the second. In the first, I illustrate my interpretation of Shaw and Van Engen. I understand them to argue that the missionary must be aware of three worldviews. (In the second diagram, he or she must be aware of four.)

Shaw and Van Engen base their model on three biases: 1) Communication is intercultural; 2) The message did not originate with us; and 3) The process is must pass through the universal level. Here I would like to discuss the third bias.

The “universal level” concept is based on the following: all humans share a basic commonality of experience which they express in different ways through their cultures. As Shaw and Van Engen state: “Humans were created to be creative and express that creativity in a multiplicity of cultural perspectives” (Shaw 2003:13). Some examples are:

All humans communicate, but they do it through different languages and styles. All humans organize themselves into societies, but the societies are very different. All humans distinguish “right” from “wrong,” but what is acceptable in one culture may not be acceptable in another.

Let us begin with Figure 12. Here the task of the missionary is to accommodate the message to the worldview of the people. But he or she should not do this by “converting” his or her worldview to theirs. He or she should try to understand basic human experience and how a particular culture expresses those experiences in their way. Only then can the missionary begin to communicate God’s message to them. In Sperber’s terms this means understanding the contexts they process in their cognitive environment.
as a result of their experience, and choosing which of their contexts is appropriate for communicating God’s message. So the missionary does not “translate” his or her culture to another. The missionary tries to understand how to accommodate God’s message into their cognitive environment.

Yet the thrust of Shaw and Van Engen’s argument includes another factor: the Biblical writers. Their argument is that the Biblical writers accommodated their message to their audience. This is much like my illustration of the missionary task, but in reality it is much more complicated than I have yet explained. Today, for a missionary to communicate what the Biblical writers wanted to communicate, he or she must take into account

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5 They refer to this as a “horizon” and divide them into two horizons: Old Testament and New Testament.
account four perspectives: God’s, the Biblical writer’s, his or her own, and the people’s. Just as our goal is to communicate God’s message without our bias, now we must communicate the Biblical message the Biblical writer’s bias, in order for the people to understand God’s original message accommodated to their present bias. Figure 13 illustrates this.

Rather than illustrating the missionary as part of “the chain of communication,” I place the missionary at the center of the process as the “facilitator of the communication.” My idea is that the fewer cultures through which the message passes, the better will be the communication of the original message. I call this “shortening the chain.” The final goal is for a people to know God directly from their own perspective and experience.

Figure 13: The Missionary as a Facilitator
In Figure 13, God has spoken to the Biblical writers within their perspective, represented by a pentagram. The missionary, who has come to know God through the message of the Biblical writers, wants to communicate the same message, but without his or her personal perspective, represented by a square. If the people see God as a square, they will reject him. So the missionary’s task is to help the people understand, not the Biblical writers perspective, but how the intent of God’s message can be expressed in their way of thinking, represented by a triangle. The missionary is not the channel of the message, but a facilitator of the communication process.

The thesis of Shaw and Van Engen is that the Biblical writers accommodated God’s message to the people’s mentality, and that we should do likewise.

“Contemporary communication of the biblical message can be modeled after the way the writers of Scripture utilized earlier texts and restructured them for their contemporary audience” (Shaw 2003:xiv).

Our task is to discern “God’s original intention.” This returns us to relevance theory. It is not the Biblical text that contains the meaning of the message, but God’s intention in that message, how the original recipients processed it, and how we should also process it. We should not process the original recipients conclusions, but the intent of the original message.

Another way of saying this is that surface level diversity is an expression of deep-level commonality. Generally speaking, code theory deals with the surface level manifestations, and relevance theory deals with the deep-level meaning. Both are necessary to explain communication. But cross-cultural communication must deal with deep-level meanings. In mono-cultural communication these meanings are shared
unconsciously. I believe these are similar to Sperber’s “contexts” in one’s cognitive environment.

Here I must interject that Blacking sees music as a channel for expressing deep-level meanings: “Music can express social attitudes and cognitive processes” (Blacking 1973:54). This could be useful for cross-cultural communication, allowing the missionary to understand a people’s cognitive environment through their music in order to understand which contexts to use in communicating God’s message to them.

“Shortening the Chain”

I see the missionary task as one of “shortening the chain.” In other words, part of our task is to eliminate accumulated biases in the message. Again, the goal of all Gospel communication is for the people to know God directly, and not to depend on the missionary, nor on Biblical writers experiences.

Revelation Dynamic

This leads me to propose that we live in what I will call a “revelation dynamic.” (See Figure 14.) On the one hand, God has revealed himself to us in the Scriptures. (Originally, he revealed himself directly to the Biblical writers.) We see God through the bias of the Biblical writers. But God also wants us to know him personally, for us to see him from our own perspective and experience. I will call these two perspectives: “Scripture” and “experience.” Both are necessary. That is why we live in a “revelation dynamic.”
A knowledge of the Scriptures without a personal experience of God results in a dead faith. Whereas, a personal experience of God without a knowledge of the Scriptures results in a precarious faith. While the goal is to know God personally, we rely on the testimony of those who have gone before us, and especially of those who had the privilege of walking closely to Him.

I would make mention that this dynamic includes two perspectives which are illustrated by a square and a pentagram. The square represents one’s personal perspective of God and the pentagram represents a biblical writer’s perspective. We come to know God through both perspectives, recognizing that neither is complete.

1. We know God through what the Biblical authors have written.
2. The goal is to know God personally.
3. We live in the dynamic of both perspectives. One without the other is either dead or dangerous.

Figure 14: Revelation Dynamic
SOME IMPLICATIONS

Combining the missiological bias with communication theory, has some implication and applications.

The Purpose of Communication

Any communication has its bias. In other words, one is trying to accomplish something, and this implies changing the environment. There is no “neutral” communication. As Berlo says, “All communication behavior has as its purpose the eliciting of a specific response from a specific person (or group of persons)” (Berlo 1960:16). And Sperber states, “Communication is the intent to change the cognitive environment of another” (Sperber 1986:64). But to what end? Schultz argues that all communication should be for building God’s kingdom or “shalom” (Schultz 2000:15). From a missiological bias, our purpose in communicating the Gospel message is to change others. We want them to understand what God has said for them to respond to Him. Often in discussing communication theory, we forget this aspect, which is also a bias. When doing research, one needs to remember from which bias he or she is doing the research, as this will affect the conclusions. For example, with a missionary bias, the purpose for communicating is to share the Gospel message. Whereas, in worship music, the purpose of communication is to adore God.

Communicating the Gospel Message

I mentioned before the implications of code theory versus relevance theory in proclaiming the Gospel message. With code theory, the implication is that the meaning is in the message. Therefore, much emphasis has been placed on preparing the message,
packaging it, and transmitting it. This results in thirty minute, three-point, illustrated sermons; tracts of The Four Spiritual Laws or The Bridge Illustration; TV evangelists; and “Cold-Turkey” evangelism. The justification is that if the Gospel message has been “correctly” presented, then our task as missionaries has been completed.

Relevance theory reminds us of the need to consider what goes on in the mind of the hearer. Our message may be wonderfully presented, but the meaning the hearer gives to our message may be completely different, because he or she processes the message in a completely different cognitive context from ours. In order for us to communicate effectively the Gospel message, we must understand the cognitive environment of a person and the possible context that person will use to process our message. Therefore, especially in cross-cultural communication, we need to spend more time in understanding our hearers, and not just in preparing our message.

Informing versus Communicating

Another application of relevance theory to Missiology is the distinction Sperber makes between “informing” and “communicating.” In the first case, the speaker presents evidence to the hearer: she says something to him. But the hearer does not know that she wants to communicate. He merely hears what she says, and she does not know if he recognizes her intent to communicate or not. There is no mutual recognition of an attempt to communicate. Monologues are good examples of informing. The speaker talks, but doesn’t know if a potential hearer is processing what she is saying or not. A lot of preaching and evangelism fall into this category.
In the case of communication, according to Sperber, the speaker declares her intention of communicating (by saying or doing something), and the hearer acknowledges this (by saying or doing something). Now the speaker knows that the hearer knows she wants to communicate, and she is certain that he will process the evidence she gives. I can refer to this as “dialogue.” Usually we think of dialogue when both persons speak alternatively. But dialogue can include much non-verbal communication as well. One person can be speaking and the other responding by body movements, facial expressions, or small sounds. Traditionally, this has been called feedback. Good communication needs to have mutual recognition of the intent to communicate. To present the Gospel message we need to practice this. Some examples are: small group discussions, personal conversations, and long-term friendships.
COMMUNICATION AND MUSIC

How does code theory, relevance theory, and the missiological bias relate to communication in music?

Applying Code Theory to Musical Performance

King has described communication through music using code theory (King 1989:60). See Figure 15.

![Figure 15: King’s Model of Music Communication](image)

In this diagram, a message is encoded and, during a musical performance, is sent through four different channels: linguistic, music, movement, and performer. The participants decode the message and give feedback to the sender. I would like to note that the linguistic channel is verbal, whereas the other three channels are non-verbal. The
emphasis is on the message being sent, the different channels it goes through, and the decoding process of the receiver.

I find Sperber’s relevance theory very useful for adding to this model to help us understand more of the underlying process. The questions that code theory do not answer are: How does the music (style, rhythm) communicate? What are the musicians communicating non-verbally? What are the participants communicating by their movements (dance)? Relevance theory gives us one perspective from which to view these phenomena.

Apply Relevance Theory to Musical Performance

Whereas code theory is excellent for studying the lyrics of a song, relevance theory allows us to study the non-verbal aspects of a musical performance. Since relevance theory focuses on the intent of the communication and the meaning given to it by the hearer, then the actual musical style, the movements of the participants, and the performance of the musicians are not our object of study. We need to investigate the intention of the musician in the performance and the meaning given to the performance by the participants.

I think this is the thrust of Barz’s book: Shadows in the Field. (Barz 1997:18) Ethnomusicologists have spent years studying the musical sound itself, the lyrics, the dance, the social context, and the performance, but now Barz, Cooley, Titon, Rice, (in their book: Shadows in the Field) are advocating getting into the mindset of the performers and listeners. This implies not only participant observation, but actually performing the music along with the musicians. Titon is more specific when he says that
knowledge is experiential (Titon 1997:94) and that one has to perform the music in order to understand it. I believe that only by playing the music with the musicians and understanding them through long-term relationships will we be able to begin to comprehend what is actually being communicated through the music. In the same way, only by listening to the performance and developing friendships with those who are listening/participating to the performance will we be able to understand the meaning they assign to the music. As Wade say, “People make music meaningful and useful in their lives” (Wade 2004:1).
COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL THROUGH MUSIC

I now come to the point of trying to bring together code theory, relevance theory, Missiology, and ethnomusicology. I will attempt this by using two songs as examples.

A Biblical Song

First let us consider a song the apostle Paul uses in Philippians 2:6-11:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

According to code theory, this is a message about Jesus, who left heaven to come to earth to die on a cross and later be exalted. Paul used symbols to express his idea in the Greek language. Here those Greek words have been translated into English. Paul’s encoded his idea into Greek, it has been translated into English, we read it, and decode it to form the same idea in our minds. We now understand Paul’s message which he wrote two thousand years ago!

Since we have only the words to this song and not an electronic recording, we have lost the music, the movement, and the performance. Therefore this song only comes to us through the linguistic channel, and code theory is an excellent perspective to study its message: Jesus humbled himself, died for us, and was exalted; we are to do likewise: humble ourselves, die for others, and exalt Jesus.
Relevance theory turns our attention to other aspects of this song. What was Paul’s intent in writing this? It was not that Paul wanted to write (and maybe sing) a song. He wanted to change the cognitive environment of his readers. He already knew them, had spent time with them, and probably knew the cognitive context his readers would use to process this song. He may have known to what tune they would sing this song, with which instruments, and how these factors would influence the meaning they would attach to it. From our point of view we can only conclude that Paul wanted them to understand Christian humility and obedience.

If we sang this same song today, would it communicate to us what Paul intended? Obviously not if we sang it in Greek, so first it has to be translated into English. Would we give it the same meaning that the Philippians did when they read Paul’s letter? Probably not. Our cognitive environment is different from theirs and the context we choose to process the message is probably very different from theirs. Here is where Shaw and Van Engen’s model helps us. We need to understand Paul’s intention, not Paul’s exact words, in order to understand Paul’s message. Furthermore, we need to understand God’s intention in inspiring Paul to write this message. So as to not complicate this discussion further, I will simplify it by the question: How do we as Christian today in the US, in the twenty-first century, express the humility and obedience that God asks of us? And how do we communicate to others that this is what God desires? What music would best communicate this, with which instruments, and played by whom? The task is neither easy nor simple.
A Contemporary Song

We might try to communicate the intent of Philippians 2 by using a different song. First let us discuss this song with the same method I have used on the first song. The song “Lord, I lift your name on high” has become very popular and well-known both in the United States and in Ecuador where I have served as a missionary. The lyrics are:

Lord, I lift your name on high,
Lord, I love to sing your praises.
I’m so glad you’re in my life.
I’m so glad you came to save us.

You came from heaven to earth, to show the way,
From the earth to the cross, my debt to pay;
From the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky;
Lord, I lift your name on high.

I will address the question: How might this song communicate its message? Code theory will draw us to analyze the text, which, according to Sperber, is the best channel for explicit communication (Sperber 1986:175). I see the second verse to be very similar to the song in Philippians 2. Here on paper, that is the only analysis I can do: song text. But let us assume that this song is being performed in a Sunday morning worship service. Not only will I analyze the song text, but I will also observe the musicians as they perform as well as the congregation and their verbal response and body movements. I will note what instruments they are playing, what style of music is used, and even the type of sound system they are using.

From a code theory perspective, I would ask, “What is the message in the music?” But relevance theory opens my investigation to different areas. With a relevance theory perspective, I begin to ask the question, what are the musicians trying to communicate
through the song? I also ask: what does the musical performance mean to the congregation? I could begin to analyze whether communication is occurring at all or is something else going on? All kinds of possibilities come to mind: Is the song text communicating one thing and the music another? The musicians another? Does the congregation infer meaning from the text or from the musical sound? Is the congregation listening to the music or text at all? Are the musicians trying to communicate with the congregation or are they doing something else? Is communication actually occurring?

I believe here it is appropriate to add another variable to this discussion: theology. Usually communication is seen as including two persons: the sender and the receiver. In a worship service, I believe we need to add another person to the model: God. Our communication model is now a triad. (See Figure 16.) This makes the musical part of a worship service more complicated: who is trying to communicate with whom? And who really is communicating with whom? Who is listening to whom?

![Figure 16: The Communication Triad during the Worship Music](image-url)
If we include the missiological bias, a music leader’s function is to bring the congregation into communication with God. The music leader will first communicate with the congregation, but later the congregation may desist from communication with the leader and seek direct communication with God. I must add that the music leader must already be in communication with God. I propose that the ideal is for a simultaneous three-way communication to take place.

Again, this opens up all kinds of possibilities of what can occur in a worship service. The worst scenario is that no one is communicating with anyone. The musicians are playing a song with no intention of connecting with the congregation. The congregation is just listening to what they interpret as noise. And no one is even trying to communicate with God.

Another scenario could be that the congregation and the musicians are communicating well, but divine communication is non-existent. Or some could be communicating with God but not with each other.

Add to this the extra variable of the different channels of communication, and the equation grow more complex. I suggest some possibilities: the congregation is communicating with God through dance, but not through the lyrics of the song. The congregation interprets one message in the lyrics, but another in the music. The musicians are communicating with God in the lyrics, but their dance is communicating something very different to the congregation. I could go on and on.
SPIRITUAL COMMUNICATION

In the preceding discussion I have assumed a bias I now wish to explain: communication with God. Every author I have mentioned so far has assumed that divine communication takes place through Scripture. I agree with that, but do not limit it to that. The missiological bias assumes that God has spoken, and that we are ambassadors of an already spoken message. This is the foundation of evangelism and missions. But if we limit ourselves to this assumption, we bar the Holy Spirit from our lives and from our ministry. The authors I have referred to in this paper acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit, but have not incorporated it fully into their communication models.

Karen Kuchan

Karen Kuchan has broken into a new frontier in her dissertation on “Visio Divina.” She proposes that a person can enter into direct communication with God, not just verbally, but experientially (Kuchan 2004:153). Her bias is that knowledge is not only rational, but experiential. (This is what Titon and Rice are proposing for ethnomusicology investigation.) She works as a Christian psychologist, and her research is from her experience in counseling with postmodern North Americans. She takes her theory from Ephesians 1:18- “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”

Kuchan’s research supports my idea that experiencing God is both through direct experience and through the Scriptures. I referred to this before as the “Revelation Dynamic.” Kuchan states:
“The experience of God’s love in the deep heart communicated through images and symbols as revealed through the written Word of God provides a communication vehicle that ultimately reveals the truth of God’s word and God’s love for all humanity” (Kuchan 2004:203).

Surprisingly Kuchan’s concept of knowledge is very similar to Sperber’s concept of communication. Sperber summarizes the communication process as “an intention to modify directly … the cognitive environment of the audience” (Sperber 1986:57).”

Kuchan expresses the same idea, but in different terms:

“all knowledge is logically interconnected by ideas, concepts and facts that are contained within a force field that is movable as a result of experiential encounters on the periphery of the force field. These peripheral experiences can have an effect on the interconnections of the knowledge contained within the web ” (Kuchan 2004:13).

By combining these two perspectives, Kuchan’s “Visio Divina” is a divine communication experience where God modifies the cognitive environment of the person.

I believe this is one type of spiritual communication which needs further investigation.

I propose that every Christian believes this, but in the academic community we have not been able to reconcile it with research. Kuchan states that “Visio Divina, as of yet, has not been validated by the scientists, psychologists or social workers (Kuchan 2004:156). We do not need new methods, but a whole new bias from which to study spiritual communication, and much more so if we are to study spiritual communication through music. To do so, we will have to accept the bias that knowledge is not exclusively rational, but also experiential.
Communication Biases

Different biases and theories are useful for the same research project. Allow me to diagram this, using the Data Box illustration I discussed and developed in my previous tutorial. The assumption for this discussion is that the same data can support more than one theory (Guba 1994:107), and therefore conclusions are not determined by the data, but by the assumptions. The data support the conclusions, but do not determine them.

Various Communication Biases and Theories

![Diagram](Image)

Figure 17: The Data Box Applied to Communication

Now let us apply this metatheory to communication theory. Figure 17 illustrates this. Each arrow represents the development of a communication theory. The arrow begins with one’s bias, passes through data (in this case: “communication experience”) and ends with a theory. The communication phenomenon is common to all of us, but we
can examine it from different perspectives. A linguistic bias of communication results in
code theory; a cognitive psychology bias results in relevance theory; a Missiology bias
results in accommodation theory; and a theological bias results in a divine revelation
perspective.

As I discussed in my previous tutorial, no perspective is the “correct” perspective.
Each perspective is like a window that allows us to see different aspects of the same
phenomenon. Communication is no exception. Therefore, in order to better understand
communication, we need to examine it from many different perspectives (biases) and
many different theories. An investigator will not agree or accept all biases, but he or she
should not limit the research to just one bias. For my research in music, I will use all of
the four biases already mentioned, including theology.

A theological perspective on divine revelation adds to our understanding of
communication, especially during the musical part of a worship service. Kuchan’s
investigation did not include worship services, but individual weekly therapy over
periods from six months to over a year. Nor did she include the musical aspect. But she is
one of the few at Fuller Theological Seminary to academically propose that God can
communicate directly with an individual.

Nettl has proposed that music is frequently used for communication with the
spiritual: "The function of music in human society, what music ultimately does, is to
control humanity's relationship to the supernatural, mediating between people and other
beings" (Nettl 1983:159). I would like to propose that music during a worship service is
particularly useful for communicating with God, and that Christians expect to
communicate with God during the music of a worship service.
In Kuchan’s research, her subjects encountered God in prayer through imagery. Some would describe God as holding them in his arms or walking and talking with them beside a river. I would ask the question: Could this occur during the music of a worship service? The question is not: Can I prove that a person can encounter God in the music? but: Does a person experience God in the music? Is spiritual communication occurring?
CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

I return to my original question: “How does music communicate?” Music communicates both explicitly and implicitly. The most explicit message is in the song text. Other messages are in the musical sound, the performance of the musicians, and the physical and historical context of the performance. The implicit messages are in both the musicians and the audience. They interpret the messages they are receiving and give them meanings. In both cases, the channels are the same, but the analysis is completely different. It may be interesting to see how the explicit messages compare with the implicit meanings, and through which channels communication is occurring the most.

To analysis song texts, the musical sound, the movements of the persons involved and the physical and historical context, one could do so without talking to anyone present. But to undercover the meanings that are being assigned to these things, one has to ask the persons present.

Personally, I am convinced that the communication triad I developed (figure 16) will prove a useful model for investigating a musical worship performance. The great limitation is that the theories discussed in this paper can only deal with one aspect of that triad: communication between musicians and audience. The other two sides need to be dealt with in another tutorial to find an appropriate model for their analysis.
REFERENCES CITED


