Lecture 13: Semantic Barriers to Communication

The previous lectures focussed on the reasons for barriers to communication and the physical and social barriers that can obstruct communication.

The following lecture discusses the semantic barriers to communication. The material for this lecture has been adapted from Lewis (1980).

Semantic barriers (Lewis, 1980): The word ‘semantics’ comes from the Greek word, ‘semantikos’, which means ‘significant’. ‘Semantics’ in the context of communication refers to the meanings of words. Semantic barriers refer to the obstacles caused in communication due to problems with the interpretation of word meanings.

Some categories of semantic barriers along with ways of dealing with them are explained below:

a. Allness: Allness is an attitude of finality in communication. Allness refers to a tendency to convey or assume or believe that what someone says about a particular subject is all there is to say on that subject. For example, someone may say that bananas contain large amounts of sugar, which when consumed produces large amounts of energy (calories) and that makes people fat, which is bad for health, and so they must be avoided. They may not even be open to the idea that in addition to calories, bananas are also one of the richest sources of potassium, and consuming bananas may actually be good for health.

Some ways in which allness may be reduced or dealt with are:

i. Indexing: One can tag memories or knowledge of what one is saying with units of the category the memory belongs to. This can stimulate ideas that are connected to what one is saying. This in turn helps accept a larger range of ideas.

ii. Date: Using dates for the information one is sharing helps contextualize what is being said, thereby opening up possibilities of and an acceptance of additional perspectives.

iii. Use et cetera: Using the word et cetera is indicative of one’s acknowledgement of additional opinions or perspectives on what one is talking about.

iv. Use quotations: Using quotations or acknowledging the author(s) of the ideas one is sharing helps situate the conversation and the information
that is being shared, within a context. This, in turn, is indicative of the acknowledgement of the existence of other possibilities outside.


vi. Avoid labelling: Labelling is akin to stereotyping. Labelling involves attaching pre-decided descriptors (that may or may not fit) to what one is talking about. Avoiding the use of these descriptors enhances one’s ability to accept other points of view.

vii. Keep in mind that the word is not the actual thing, and no word can completely describe the actual ‘thing’: In essence what we describe depends upon our past experiences and our perceptions. Both of these are limited. We may miss out on important information while describing situations people or concepts. The kind of information different people tend to miss out is reflected in the differences in our behaviour. This in turn, creates problems, and should be avoided.

B. Levels of abstraction: This deals with the complexity of concepts we use to define what we experience. In simple words, this could be labelled as ‘non-specific' conversation where we seem to be saying too many things about the same thing at the same time.

Abstraction depends upon:

- Extensional knowledge: This operates on perceptions and uses names, statistics, and descriptions from actual observation which can be verified by someone else.

- Intensional knowledge: This involves inferences, opinions, assumptions, judgments, and generalizations. While using intensional knowledge, a person is more concerned with verbal description of an event than with the event itself.

Abstraction may manifest itself in our conversation as:

i. Closed-mind syndromes: Closed mind syndromes stems from allness. We start believing that since we are exploring various points of view, we are in a person to cover all points of view there may be about a particular subject, and so others cannot have points of view that we may not have thought about it. In reality when others share points of view that are different from us, we try and find ways to refute them because we believe that we know everything.
ii. **Bypassing**: Bypassing is the tendency to ignore the fact that the same word can have different meanings (e.g. run, fast, mouse), and that different words can have the same meaning (e.g. restroom, washroom, loo). This leads to our unwillingness to understand the other person’s perspective or way of describing the same things. This also leads to our unwillingness to acknowledge that what we are saying may be interpreted differently by the receiver of our message since the words we use may have different connotations in different contexts. This can lead to a breakdown in communication.

In order to deal with abstraction, we can:

- Increase our vocabulary by reading and listening to auditory information (conversations, television and radio programs, movies etc.) that use the language in question: This would help us realize what else is out there and how what we say might be interpreted.
- Actively seek feedback from the receiver of our messages to find out if what we have said is being interpreted the way it was intended.

C. **Tendency to evaluate or judge**: We tend to evaluate or judge the messages we receive based on our past experiences with that category of messages. We evaluate to help us decide whether we are comfortable or uncomfortable with the information we are receiving and whether we understand what we are receiving. Categorization helps us reduce the complexity of information in our environment. So, when we are bombarded with information in quantities and complexities that we are unable to handle individually, and we feel the need to understand it, we tend to evaluate the information we are receiving. This causes problems with effective understanding as we tend to miss out vital information that is connected to what we perceive.

Some ways in which we may evaluate the meanings of words we hear are:

a. **Confusion of facts with inferences**: Sometimes, when facts are presented to us for the sake of analysis, we take them at face value and decide that these facts are in fact the final message or the inference. An *inference* is a statement about the unknown made on the basis of the known. Collections of facts logically tied in with each other should lead us to an inference. For example, one of our students comes and tells us that she has not been able to study because there was a party the previous night. As teachers who feel that students do not want to study and so they find excuses to not come
prepared to class, we assume, on the basis of just one statement, that all students were not able to study because of a party the previous night. Maybe only one student made this mistake, maybe many did, but we will not know that till we ask other students whether they have come prepared to class or not.

Some ways in which fact inference confusion can be handled are:

- Avoid guessing what is going on in other people’s minds.
- Trust your own interpretation of facts instead of blindly believing any interpretation that you come across.

b. Polarization: Polarization refers to ‘either or’ thinking, or judging people and events in terms of extremes. Most of the times situations, people, and concepts are not absolute. Human behaviour and its reasons are not absolute. They are relative. Relative descriptions require more complex thinking and more time to understand. In order to simplify our understanding and move on to the next item on our agenda, we tend to take the easy way out and classify the descriptions we hear and read as good or bad, right or wrong, this way or that way. This leads to misinterpretation of the message and causes problems in communication.

Some ways in which our tendency to polarize may be curbed are:

- Observe the contrary or middle ground
  - Specify the degree between the extremes
  - Use a quantitative index when possible
  - Use substantive middle terms when available
  - Recognize differing perceptions as products of different conditionings

c. Bias and prejudice: Bias deals with our tendency to skew our understanding of the words we hear in favour of or against particular situations, concepts or people depending upon how we feel about them. Prejudice specifically deals with our hostile attitude towards people, situations and concepts that we feel uncomfortable about. Prejudice causes us to believe that the people, situations and concepts we dislike are, in fact, flawed, and any information that indicates otherwise does not
need to be taken into account while trying to understand them. This causes us to leave out relevant information while perceiving messages pertaining to the people situations and concepts we are biased against, and add additional information to complete the picture of goodness and appropriateness while perceiving messages pertaining to the people, situations and concepts we are biased towards.

This, as is evident from the above description, results in the reception and transmission of an imbalanced message, and causes difficulty in interpretation.

d. **Stereotyping:** As discussed earlier, stereotyping is our tendency to define collections of stimuli in terms of the categories they belong to. This leads to the addition or deletion of important descriptors of the situations, people or concepts that are the subjects of these interactions.

Some ways in which we can reduce or avoid biases and prejudices and stereotypes are:

- Remember that no two people, statements, or events, are identical
- Remember that all individuals and organizations are constantly undergoing change

e. **Frozen evaluations:** Frozen evaluations are judgments set in concrete. At times, we tend to be stuck in our evaluations of people, concepts and situations. We may have formed a judgement or an opinion at a different time, under different circumstances. And we are so set in our understanding of what we see and hear that we stick to the same judgement even in a totally different time and context. An example of this could be the belief that an employee who was found to be disloyal five years ago, is still working against the organization.

Some ways in which we can avoid making frozen evaluations are:

- Ask ‘when’ did a particular event or evaluation take place and question its validity in the present time and context
- Remember that people and organizations are constantly evolving according to the feedback they receive from their environments

C. **Snap judgments:** A snap judgment is a direct, uncontrolled immediate response to some circumstance. As the term suggests, snap judgments refer to immediate
reactions we have to what we experience. By definition, these are imbalanced interpretations and analyses based on incomplete information we receive from the environment. Since while making snap judgments we selectively perceive only a small fraction of the medley of stimuli we are bombarded with, the interaction is ridden with gaps.

Some ways in which Snap Judgments may be dealt with are:

- Consciously giving oneself the opportunity to consider the words heard and weighing the evidence before reacting.
- Controlling one's emotions and considering facts before reacting

D. Misuses of the language: Sometimes we use language incorrectly or interpret the use of language incorrectly. We may do this in the following ways:

i. Misuse of small talk: Small talk refers to information exchanged in casual conversations. Sometimes, we misinterpret this information exchanged in casual conversations as vital information on which we can base our decisions and interpretations. This, if incorrect, can cause problems with communication.

ii. Misuse of ‘is’: The use of the word, ‘is’ stems from allness and refers to absolute interpretations of events. When we use the word, ‘is’, we indicate that our interpretation of events is absolute, and fully correct, and that there is not and cannot be another interpretation of the events we are referring to. Such absolute interpretation, as one may agree, should be understood as flawed.

iii. Misuse of ‘And’: Sometimes we use the word, ‘and’ to connect the content of interaction. Sometimes this content contains ideas that may not be related. Indiscriminate use of the word, ‘and’ may lead to misinterpretation regarding the existence of complex relationships where there are none.

One way of dealing with problems caused due to misuse of language is to remember to focus on the context of messages in order to understand how they must be interpreted.

Conclusion:

The barriers discussed in this lecture cover only the most significant barriers caused in interaction due to flaws with the interpretation of meanings in messages. The lists of barriers and their solutions are not absolute. There is always room for addition,
deletion or modification to what has been discussed above. The purpose of these lectures is to stimulate discussion and critical thought. The discussions in these lectures are meant to be the stimuli for a lot of self study.

Questions:

References: