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Implication: Saying Without Saying

*“When can couple therapy be terminated?”
“When the husband says to the wife, ‘This coffee is terrible’
and they BOTH know that he is talking about the coffee.”
—Paul Watzlawick*

Implication is one of the most common ways that we unconsciously make meaning when we communicate. A speaker’s words imply something that the listener infers. My wife says that she is cold, implying that she would like to be warm, and I infer that she would like me to turn up the heat. I say that I didn’t hear about what our son did today, and she infers that I would like to know, so she tells me. If you examine your ordinary daily communications, you will find that implication is usually far more common than direct and explicit communications like, “Turn up the heat, please,” or “What did Mark do today?”

Implication is a result of attending to the more general significance or meaning of a particular scope of communication, action, thing, or event, categorizing it in some way. In a good relationship, thinking beyond what someone says to what else they might mean or want is a sign of respect, consideration, and caring. I hear my wife say that she is cold, I put myself in her position, and think, “I’ll bet she’d like to be warmer; I’ll turn up the heat.” Using “other” position in this way is the basis for empathy and compassion, attending to others’ needs and wants in addition to my own. Compassion and empathy is a fundamental component of any good relationship, and it is also a basis of any civilized society that treats all its members as human beings.

Unfortunately, the ambiguity of implication is also an opportunity for misunderstanding, confusion, or worse, separating people rather than bringing them together. For instance, if someone gives you a present, what is the implication? Is it a spontaneous and freely given sign of appreciation—“no strings attached.” Or is it a dutiful satisfaction of a past obligation, or an atonement for some guilt, real or imagined? Does this gift imply a sexual invitation, create a future obligation, or something else altogether?

Years ago, when a friend of mine baked some bread and gave a loaf to her psychoanalyst, the implications of that gift were explored for the next six months—at a hundred dollars an hour! As far as she was concerned, it was simply an appreciative gift, and not a symbolic communication that she wanted to “mother” him because he was immature, or that he was “loafing,” or that he was doing a “crumby” job.

In a good relationship, even these kinds of possible implication can be expressed and explored openly and playfully, with no one taking it very seriously, an opportunity for creativity and interaction. But if a relationship is strained, tense, or defensive, people have a tendency to search for negative and harmful implications that can be very damaging to the relationship.

The more threatened and defensive someone is, the more they are likely to be vigilant for any possible negative implication. As an old joke goes, one person says, “Good morning,” and the other says to himself, “Hmm, I wonder what he meant by that?” When someone frequently attends to negative implications in a wide range of contexts, we describe them as “paranoid.” It seems likely that someone would learn to do this in a context in which family members used a lot of negative implication instead of direct communication about important issues, with severe punishment for not making the correct inferences.

Of course, sometimes it is very important to attend to the implication of an event, because even a very small event may have a very important meaning. A friend of mine found books of matches around the house from places he had never been. This puzzled him, but he didn’t think too much about it. About a year later, he found out that his wife had been having a series of affairs, bringing back matches from different bars and restaurants where she had met her lovers.

However, there might have been some other completely innocent meaning for the strange matches. They could have been a casual gift from a friend who was clearing out her kitchen cupboard. “Here, can you use these matches?” In that case, if my friend had thought of threatening implications, that would have been an imaginary meaning that would have caused unnecessary unhappiness.

Often we find implications on our own, but sometimes others invite us to do it. “It’s interesting that you would say that,” is a vague implication that the speaker is putting the statement into a larger category, and the listener is likely to search for what it is. Depending on the facial expression and tone of voice, this ambiguous communication could be a criticism, a compliment, an accusation, a sexual invitation, or any number of other possible communications. The absence of communication, particularly when someone is expecting it, is even more ambiguous and fertile in possible implications. What does that silence mean?

So while implication can be a very graceful and respectful way to communicate, it can also be a source of serious miscommunication, disguising accusations, blame, and all sorts of other destructive messages. Like all patterns of communication, implication can be used in negative ways or positive ways. When we understand how they work, we can avoid a lot of misunderstanding and unhappiness. There are several kinds of implication, and each is somewhat different.

Verbal Implication

Unconsciously thinking of the world as being divided into two (or occasionally 3 or more) exclusive categories is an essential ingredient of most verbal implication, and often this digital dichotomy is created by negation. “I am not a young man” is usually understood to mean, “I am an old man.” “He’s no Einstein” implies the opposite. “That’s not her heart she’s wearing on her sleeve” implies that some other part of her body is.

Implications often occur in the form of questions. “Is the door open” implies that the speaker would like it closed. A literal answer to, “Can you answer the phone?” is “Yes,” but most people understand that this question is an implied request to answer the phone. If someone does answer with a literal response, “Yes,” and makes no move toward the phone, it is usually understood to be a “smart aleck” remark! (And the implication of making a smart aleck remark is usually disrespect, superiority, or condescension.) In the past this kind of question has been called a “conversational postulate,” but more recently some have called it a “conversational implication.”

Some linguists use the term “politeness” pattern to describe this kind of communication, because they are ways to gently and gracefully say something or make a request without overtly asking. Someone who uses them doesn’t have to fully commit themselves to their request. And if the other person doesn’t respond, that is not an overt refusal of the unspoken request.

Although implications can cause trouble because they are often so ambiguous and unconscious, the same subtlety can also be used in very positive ways. Implication was used extensively and deliberately by Milton Erickson to help people make changes, and his work provides a useful arena to understand more clearly exactly how verbal implication works, so that we can use it deliberately and wisely. Here are some paraphrased examples of Erickson’s therapeutic statements (with the implication in parentheses).

“You don’t want to discuss your problems in that chair. You certainly don’t want to discuss them standing up. But if you move your chair to the other side of the room, that would give you a different view of the situation, wouldn’t it? (From this different position you will want to discuss your problems.)

“I certainly don’t expect that you’ll stop wetting the bed this week, or next week, or even this month.” (I certainly expect that you will stop sometime soon.)

“Your conscious mind will probably be very confused about what I’m saying.” (Your unconscious mind will understand completely.)

Examining these examples, we can begin to generalize about the structure of verbal implication.

1. There is a presumption of a categorical division of the world into two (or occasionally three or more) scopes or categories, usually either/or, here/there, now/later, conscious/unconscious, etc. This division is often created by negation.
2. This categorical division can exist in space, time, or events (matter and/or process).
3. A statement that is made about one half of the either/or categorical division implies that the opposite is true of the other half. When you use negation in a statement, that is a further invitation to think of the world as divided into two opposites, and to think of the opposite of whatever is negated.

If you look back at the examples above, you will find these three elements in each of them. Since implication is often confused with presupposition (which Erickson also used extensively) it is useful to contrast the two.

Presuppositions:

1. Can be identified unambiguously by examining a verbal communication in written form. The simplest way to identify presuppositions is to negate the entire communication, and find out what is still true.

For example, take the sentence, “I’m glad that you have the ability to change quickly and easily.” Negated, this becomes, “I’m not glad that you have the ability to change quickly and easily.” Only gladness is negated, the rest of the sentence, “you have the ability to change quickly and easily” remains true, so that is what is presupposed. The speaker creates the presupposition; the listener does not.

2. Are usually passively accepted unconsciously.

3. Are usually processed and responded to unconsciously, yet they can be identified consciously and challenged. “Your statement presupposes that I have the ability to change quickly and easily, and I disagree.”

Presuppositions have been studied extensively by linguists, and 29 different linguistic patterns of presupposition in English have been identified.

Implications:

1. Can't be identified unambiguously by examining a verbal statement.

For example: “Of course, it's difficult to change quickly and easily in your everyday life.” The implication that is inferred, “It will be easy to change quickly and easily here in my office” does not appear in the verbal statement and is difficult to notice.

2. Are generated by the listener actively inferring, using their own assumptions and world-view about the events described by the words. Many of these are shared among most members of a culture, but some may be unique to a subculture or an individual. One of the most fundamental of these assumptions is that the world can be divided into two opposite categories (sometimes more than two).

3. Are almost always processed and responded to unconsciously. Although they can be identified consciously, they can't be challenged in the same way that presuppositions can, because they do not exist in the statement. If the listener were to say, “Are you saying that I can change quickly and easily here in your office?” it is easy to reply, “No, I only said that it is difficult to change quickly and easily in your everyday life, isn't that true?”

To summarize the differences, implications are much subtler than presuppositions, they are generated actively by the listener making an inference using their knowledge and assumptions, they are typically processed entirely unconsciously, and they can't be challenged in the way that presuppositions can. Verbal implication can be described as the gentle art of saying something by saying the opposite of what you want to imply.

Creating and Delivering a Verbal Implication

1. Outcome Identify your outcome for someone you are communicating with, what you would like to have happen. (They will talk freely about personal matters.)

2. Opposite Think of the opposite of this outcome (not talking freely; keeping information secret, etc.)

3. Either/or category Choose space, time, or events (matter/process) as a way to divide the world into two opposite categories (here/there, now/later, conscious/unconscious).

4. Sentence State the opposite of your outcome in regard to the category that is not present (space, time, or event). This will imply the outcome that you want them to infer here in the present. In the examples below, the implication is presented in parentheses.

Space

“In your life outside this office, I'm sure that you would feel uncomfortable talking freely about private matters.” (Here in the office, you can feel comfortable talking about private matters.)

“If you were talking to someone at work, there would be many things that you would not want to discuss at all.” (Here you can talk about anything.)

Time

“In your first session with me, there were undoubtedly certain matters that you were not comfortable disclosing.” (In this session, you can feel comfortable disclosing anything.)

“In your previous therapy, you may have been unwilling to talk about certain personal matters that were relevant to your problem.” (Now you are willing to talk about these matters.)

Events

“I want you to carefully think about which matters are not relevant to your problem, and that you would like to keep entirely to yourself.” (You can talk freely about anything that is relevant to the problem.)

“In your normal waking state, of course there are topics that you would be very reluctant to discuss with me.” (In trance, you can easily discuss any topic.)

Another way of thinking about implication is that the client’s concern, objection, or reluctance is completely acknowledged, at the same time that it is described as being in a different scope (space, time, or event) where it won’t interfere with your outcome.

Once Erickson hypnotized a man, and gave him instructions for amnesia. When the man woke up, he said defiantly, “I can recall everything that you did with me.” Erickson responded, “That’s right. Of course you can remember everything here in my office.” Soon after that he asked the man to come with him to the waiting room to show him an article in a magazine. When they got to the waiting room, the man looked puzzled and said, “Wasn’t I supposed to have a session with you today?” Then when they went back into the office, he remembered the session again.

When someone is worried and upset about an upcoming event, you can say, “Of course you are worried about it now,” and that will imply that they won’t worry about it when it actually happens.

If someone is concerned that when they rehearsed a new behavior in their mind it took a lot of effort, you can respond, “Yes, of course, when you rehearsed it now for the first time, it took a lot of conscious effort,” that implies that at some later time it will be unconscious and effortless.

Understanding how something works is only the first step in making it into an ability. Like all things, actual practice is what can make it part of your spontaneous behavior; repeated practice can make the skill as automatic and unconscious as the way you generate language or drive a car. If you use the outline above to practice what you have learned, you can establish a basis for a fluent and unconscious skill.

Nonverbal (Contextual) Implication

Nonverbal implication creates a scope that naturally elicits the desired response. It is very common in our everyday communication, particularly in the movements and expressions of the face. The meaning of some nonverbal signals are culturally accepted and recognized, like shaking the head “No,” a beckoning hand gesture, or a frown that indicates displeasure. These signals that have agreed-upon meanings are essentially nonverbal “words” that have digital meanings, like the gestures in American Sign Language.

However, a frown can also mean concentration, puzzlement, or even gas in the stomach, so some of these signals are still somewhat ambiguous. In the same way, a sigh can imply boredom, but it can also mean relaxation or pleasure. Raised eyebrows can mean surprise or disbelief, but if the head is tilted forward, it usually implies a request for the other to respond, while if it is combined with a backward and sideways tilt of the head, it can imply a sexual innuendo. In face-to-face communication there will always be many messages that are conveyed nonverbally. Some of them will be clear digital signals, while others will be ambiguous, and some will have meaning only in a particular context. Most of these nonverbal messages are unconscious, and we typically respond to them unconsciously as well.

Since we usually respond to nonverbal implications unconsciously, we can use them to gracefully and indirectly elicit responses in others. For instance, think about what you do nonverbally when you want to end a conversation but don't want to do it overtly. You can defocus your eyes, or look away briefly, turn your body slightly away, take a short step to one side, lean back a bit, run your fingers through your hair, end a sentence with a downward inflection indicating completion, etc. Most of these behaviors don't have distinct meanings that are culturally agreed upon, so they can only be understood using implication.

One of the more difficult things about living in another culture (even if you know the language well) is that we can no longer "read" many of the nonverbal implications, leaving us uncertain about what is being communicated beyond the words that are spoken.

Our possessions and surroundings are also scopes that are full of implications. A prominent clock on the wall at work implies the importance of time, and its absence, a more relaxed attitude. The large desk, view window and other furnishings in the boss' office imply his importance, in contrast to the plain desk of a worker in a windowless cubicle. Our clothes imply volumes about our concerns (or lack of them) about neatness, comfort, style, wealth, lifestyle and attitude.

The larger context of your communication, your clothing, your nonverbal behavior—speech, pauses, tonal patterns, posture, gestures, etc.—all contribute to the meaning of what you say and do. Contextual implication is *always* a factor in every moment of communication, whether you intend it or not. When you are aware of all this, you can make sure that all aspects of the context support what you want to accomplish.

Once I knew a woman who was troubled by incessant critical internal voices, which disturbed her and kept her from fully attending to real-world events. Her spiritual teacher told her to get a job chopping vegetables in a Chinese restaurant, where vegetables are chopped very fast with a very large and very sharp knife. That is a context in which there is very strong motivation to pay close attention to the knife; it would be quite dangerous to be distracted by internal dialogue, which quickly diminished.

A mother always spoke up and answered for her anorexic daughter when Erickson asked the daughter questions, and he wanted to hear what the daughter had to say. He told the mother to get out her lipstick and mirror and hold it very close to her lips and notice how her lips tended to move when he asked the daughter questions. Putting on lipstick is a context in which the lips are kept motionless—and therefore unable to speak. Erickson's instruction was much more graceful than asking the mother to shut up so that he could hear what the daughter had to say.

You can also change someone's internal context. With several women who were incontinent due to spinal injuries, and who wanted to regain control of their elimination, Erickson put them into trance, and then had them experience sitting on the toilet, and then imagine the bathroom door opening and a strange man's

face appearing, eliciting an involuntary autonomic response of constriction. Then it was easy to give her another way to trigger that constriction response, so she didn't have to have an image of a strange man looking at her all day long!

One of Erickson's clients was a woman who was in intractable pain due to inoperable cancer, and drugs and surgery had not helped. After considerable matching of her doubts and skepticism about hypnosis, Erickson asked her, "Now tell me, madam, if you saw a hungry tiger in the next room, slowly walking into the room and eyeing you hungrily, and licking its chops, how much pain would you feel?" Immediate and extreme danger is a context in which people don't notice pain.

A man who couldn't drive outside the city limits of Phoenix without passing out and vomiting was told to put on his best suit, drive out on the flat desert to the city limits, and stop by the last telephone pole he thought he could reach. Then he was to start his car, accelerate to about 15 mph, and then put it in neutral so that it would gently coast to a stop when he passed out. If he felt faint, he was to stop the car, and get out and lie in the roadside ditch until he regained consciousness. When I first read these instructions years ago, they made no sense to me at all, yet they are filled with nonverbal implication, and they were effective in freeing that man from his limitation. He drove many miles to a neighboring town before returning home. Pause now to re-read those instructions and see how many nonverbal implications you can find. . . .

Wearing his best suit implies not vomiting, and not lying in the ditch where it would get dirty. Having to put the car into neutral implies some control, or at least delay, in passing out, and passing out implies a delay in driving out of town, rather than its impossibility. Passing out also became the *beginning* of driving out of town, not the end of it. The man passed out repeatedly in the car, but Erickson makes no mention of his vomiting or lying in the ditch.

A "horribly fat girl, prudent and prudish," came in for a first session and said that even if she lost weight she would still be about the ugliest girl in all creation. Erickson spent most of the hour-long therapy session handling and looking at a paperweight, only occasionally glancing up at her briefly. At the very end of the session he said to her:

"I hope you'll forgive me for what I have done. I haven't faced you. I know it's rude. I've played with this paperweight; it's been rather difficult to look at you. I'd rather not tell you, but since it's a psychotherapeutic situation, I really ought to tell you. Perhaps you can find the explanation. But actually I have the very strong feeling that when you get reduced, at least everything I see about you, that's why I keep avoiding looking at you, indicates that when you get reduced you will be even more sexually attractive, which is something that should not be discussed between you and me."

Since in the context of therapy, Erickson shouldn't notice or talk about her sexual attractiveness, the fact that he did, along with his rudeness in not looking at her, playing with a paperweight instead, etc. all nonverbally implied the truth of what he said.

If we summarize the essential ingredients in nonverbal implication, that will make it easier to learn to use it deliberately and systematically.

Nonverbal Implication:

1. Is provided by some element of the nonverbal context.
2. This context can be either real, or imagined/hallucinated, but it must be vivid and compelling.

3. The context directly elicits the desired response or understanding.
4. Is what Erickson often described as, “What you know, but you don’t know that you know”—a dependable involuntary response that you aren’t consciously aware of.

If you review the previous examples, you will find these four elements in each one.

Creating Nonverbal Implication

1. Select the response or outcome that you want to elicit in the other person.
2. Think of a context that would naturally and powerfully elicit that response or outcome.
3. Create that context, either:
 - a. Behaviorally, by your own actions.
 - b. By “tasking,” instructing the person to do a certain set of actions in a specified context in the real world.
 - c. Vividly and compellingly in imagination (in or out of trance).

Nonverbal contextual implication can also be combined with verbal implication and presupposition to elicit an even more powerful response. This will usually be the case with behavioral elicitation, as it was in Erickson’s last example of the overweight girl.

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