

# Watzlawick's Five Axioms

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Quite a lot of communication is carried on below the level of consciousness. You don't have to think about this sort of communication, it just happens automatically. This certainly saves some effort, but it does not always have the effect you might have chosen, if you had had the opportunity to consult yourself about the matter!

Even when you think you are *not* sending any messages, that absence of messages is quite evident to any observer, and can itself constitute quite a significant message. Not only that, but we usually transmit quite a few non-verbal messages unconsciously, even when we think we are not sending any messages at all.

This means that, unless you are a hermit, you cannot really avoid communicating. You can, of course, very easily get your communication scrambled – often in both directions – but that is not much consolation. In other words, you cannot *not* communicate... but you *can* not communicate accurately!

The "cannot not" part of that last sentence is in fact the first and best known of Paul Watzlawick's *five axioms of communication*.[\[1\]](#) Despite their age, and the changes that have occurred in the usage of some of the terms employed, each one has something helpful to offer. I will therefore list these axioms, and comment very briefly on each.

## **Axiom 1 (cannot not)**

**"One cannot not communicate."** Because every behaviour is a kind of communication, people who are aware of each other are constantly

communicating. Any perceivable behaviour, including the absence of action, has the potential to be interpreted by other people as having some meaning.

### **Axiom 2 (content & relationship)**

**"Every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a meta-communication."** Each person responds to the *content* of communication in the *context* of the relationship between the communicators.<sup>[2]</sup> The word meta-communication is used in various ways (and therefore not at all, by me) but Watzlawick uses it to mean the exchange of information about how to interpret other information.

Just as the interpretation of the words "What an idiot you are" could be influenced by the following words "Just kidding", it could also be influenced by the relationship between the communicators. In the example given, the word "idiot" might be accepted quite happily from a close friend, but convey an entirely different meaning in other circumstances.

### **Axiom 3 (punctuation)**

**"The nature of a relationship is dependent on the punctuation of the partners' communication procedures."** In many cases, communication involves a veritable maelstrom of messages flying in all directions. This applies especially to the non-verbal messages. The "punctuation" referred to is the process of organising groups of messages into meanings. This is analogous to the punctuation of written language. In either case, the punctuation can sometimes alter the meaning considerably.

For example, consider the occurrence of an angry response after an interruption, the latter having followed a suggested course of action. This might be interpreted as anger at the suggested course of action, if the interruption was "punctuated out" of the sequence, so that the suggestion and the anger were effectively grouped together as a tight sequence. However, if the receiver punctuated the information so that the interruption and the anger formed a tight sequence, it might be interpreted as anger at the interruption.

### **Axiom 4 (digital & analogic)**

**"Human communication involves both digital and analogic modalities."** This one needs a bit of translating! The term "digital", which today usually refers either to numbers, computers or fingers, is used in this axiom to refer to discrete, defined

elements of communication. These are usually words, but very specific gestures with generally agreed meanings would also qualify.

The term "analogic" also needs some translation. It is a variant of analogical, the adjective derived from analogy. It therefore refers to a correspondence, in certain respects, between things which are otherwise different. In this case, it describes a type of communication in which the representation to some extent evokes the thing to which it refers. For example, shaking a fist in front of a person's face would evoke the idea of violence.

What else needs translating? Oh yes, "modalities". As mentioned in Appendix 1, the word "modality" is used in very many different ways. In this case, I think Watzlawick is using modalities in the sense of types or sorts of information transfer.

### **Axiom 5 (symmetric or complementary)**

**"Inter-human communication procedures are either symmetric or complementary, depending on whether the relationship of the partners is based on differences or parity."** A "symmetric" relationship here means one in which the parties involved behave as equals from a power perspective. The chance of airing all the relevant issues should be greater, but it certainly does not guarantee that the communication will be optimal. The parties could simply be equally submissive, or equally domineering. However, communication between equals often does work well.

A "complementary" relationship here means one of unequal power, such as parent-child, boss-employee or leader-follower. This is much more efficient in some situations. For example, the unequal (complementary) relationship between soldiers and their officers means that soldiers are very likely to obey a surprising order, such as "Get out of the truck and jump in the river!" without delay – rather than debating it, perhaps with great interest, but quite possibly at fatal length.

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[1] Watzlawick, P., Beavin-Bavelas, J., Jackson, D. 1967. Some Tentative Axioms of Communication. In *Pragmatics of Human Communication - A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes*. W. W. Norton, New York.

[2] The content is sometimes called the *denotative* level of communication, and the relational meaning is sometimes called the *connotative* or *interpretive* level of communication.