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Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication

Written more than two decades ago, this essay was my first attempt to counter the prevailing ideology of clarity and openness in organizational communication theory and research that stood in sharp contrast to most people's experience of organizational life. Cited hundreds of times in the fields of Communication and Organizational Studies, this essay identified four functions of strategic ambiguity— specifically, its capacity to promote unified diversity, to preserve privileged positions, to foster deniability, and to facilitate organizational change. The discussion of plausible deniability foreshadowed a central theme of the Iran-Contra hearings, during which an American Lieutenant Colonel (Oliver North) testified to the U.S. Congress about the role and importance of "plausible deniability" in the illegal sale of weapons to the Nicaraguan Contras. The lack of serious consequences for the Colonel or anyone else connected to the case showed the power as well as the potential for abuse inherent in this kind of communication.

In retrospect, this essay reflects my youthful desire to edify and explore the more mysterious and less rational aspects of human connection (I was 23 when I began work on it and 26 when it was published). In focusing on these things, I paid little attention to other dynamics, such as how ambiguity can mask and sustain abuses of power. Looking back, I am also unsure about my relational definition of strategic ambiguity; it seemed to make sense at the time, but has proven difficult to study. Nevertheless, the paper accomplished what I had hoped it would, prompting scholars and practitioners alike to reflect on their assumptions about the centrality of clarity and the potential uses of ambiguity in successful organizing.

Conceptions of organizations have changed drastically in recent years. This change has occurred in two ways. First, while past conceptions paid little attention to the role of cognition in organizing, current work reflects a shift toward viewing organizational participants as thinking individuals with identifiable goals (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Harris & Cronen, 1979; Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich, 1983; Weick, 1978, 1979a). Second, whereas previous analyses of organizational behavior treated communication as an epiphenomenon, recent work focuses directly on communication processes in organizations (Dandridge, 1979; Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Interest in organizational symbolism has been far-reaching and is a central concern of students of Japanese management (Pascale & Athos, 1981) and of organizational culture (Jelinek, Smircich, & Hirsch, 1983). Pfeffer (1981, p. 44) provides a concise statement of this new emphasis: "If management involves the taking of symbolic action, then the skills required are political, dramaturgical, and language skills more than analytical or strictly quantitative skills."

This change in emphasis corresponds to developments in various fields. Researchers in communication (Bochner, 1982; Clark & Delia, 1979; Hart & Burks, 1972; Monge, Bachman, Dillard, & Eisenberg, 1982; Pearce, Cronen, & Conklin, 1979; Tracy & Moran, 1983) and linguistics (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979; Levy, 1979) are studying communication competence in ways which have implications for organizational behavior. Most of these writers view competent communication as the strategic use of symbols to accomplish goals. Moreover, a communicator's goals are not assumed to be unitary or even consistent; rather, individuals have multiple, often conflicting goals which they orient toward in an effort to satisfy rather than to maximize attainment of any one goal in particular. This perspective has evolved largely as a critical response to the "optimal" model of communication which equates effectiveness with clarity and openness. Communication theorists have rejected this particular ideology in favor of a more rhetorical view of communicator as strategist (Bochner, 1982; Parks, 1982; Wilder, 1979).[1]

While the more practitioner-oriented journals continue to publish essays which equate effective communication with open communication (e.g., Bassett, 1974; Fisher, 1982; Frank, 1982; Lorey, 1976; Sigband, 1976; VonBergen & Shealy, 1982; Wycoff, 1981) recent theoretical work reflects a genuine willingness among leading scholars and practitioners to accept the notion that organizational members use symbols strategically to accomplish goals, and in doing so may not always be completely open or clear (e.g., Pascale & Athos, 1981; Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy et al., 1983).

The overemphasis on clarity and openness in organizational teaching and research is both non-normative *and* not a sensible standard against which to gauge communicative competence or effectiveness. People in organizations confront multiple situational requirements, develop multiple and often conflicting goals, and respond with communicative strategies which do not always minimize ambiguity, but may nonetheless be effective. This essay goes beyond the assertion that people in organizations manipulate symbols to achieve goals toward a more rigorous conceptualization of how this process operates, what strategies work under what conditions, and with what effects. Specifically, this paper explores how people in organizations use ambiguity strategically to accomplish their goals.

I am not suggesting a retreat from clarity. There are numerous occasions in organizations in which greater clarity is desirable. What I am advocating is a shift in emphasis away from an overly ideological adherence to clarity toward a more contingent, strategic orientation. Pascale and Athos (1981, p. 102) capture the sentiment: "Explicit communication is a cultural assumption; it is not a linguistic imperative. Skilled executives develop the ability to vary their language along the spectrum from explicitness to indirection depending upon their reading of the other person and the situation."

The idea that people choose communication strategies to accomplish multiple goals is in sharp contrast to the classical-structuralist view of organizational behavior, which sees communication as primarily facilitating production. In the multiple-goal approach, communication is instrumental in building and maintaining self-image, in facilitating interpersonal relationships, and in advancing innovation, as well as in aiding production (Farace et al., 1977). From this perspective, organizational communication is the process by which organizing occurs, not something which takes place *in* organizations (Johnson, 1977; Putnam, 1983). Furthermore, the problem facing the typical organizational member is one of striking a balance between being understood, not offending others, and maintaining one's self-image. Many different strategies are used to orient toward conflicting interactional goals; some examples include avoiding interaction altogether, remaining silent, or changing the topic. One intriguing strategy which is of key importance to organizing involves the application of one's "resources of ambiguity" (Burke, 1969). In the next section, a more precise definition of strategic ambiguity is offered.

Defining Strategic Ambiguity

Before a definition of strategic ambiguity can be considered, I must provide a philosophical context for its understanding. The present definition of ambiguity is a direct outgrowth of the relativist view of meaning. This

perspective is critical of logical empiricism and the mirror metaphor of science (Rorty, 1979); it rejects the notion that an objective world exists which waits to be discovered. With no purely "objective" reality to describe, the existence of "literal" language becomes questionable, and all meaning is seen as fundamentally contextual and constructed, at least partly, by individuals. Language, perception, and knowledge are completely interdependent. Ortony (1979) provides an elegant summary of the argument: "Knowledge of reality, whether it is occasioned by perception, language, memory, or anything else, is a result of going beyond the information given. It arises through the interaction of that information with the *context* in which it is presented, and with the knower's pre-existing knowledge" (p. 1, italics added). The relativist position does not consider ambiguity to be a special problem, since meanings are constituted by individuals, not inherent in discourse. In contrast, the nonconstructivist position considers non-literal language to be unimportant and parasitic on "normal" usage (Ortony, 1979, p. 2).

Students of communication theory have found the relativist view of meaning to be appealing. It is reflected in the "interactional view" of communication advanced by Watzlawick and Weakland (1977). From this perspective, all action is seen as potentially communicative, and context is the key factor in determining meaning. This view is most suitable for the study of strategic ambiguity, the meaning of which is heavily dependent upon the interactional context.

Now that the important epistemological issues have been addressed, the definitional process can proceed. Ambiguity has been addressed under a variety of labels, including indirectness (Branham, 1980; Nofsinger, 1976; Szasz, 1974), vagueness (Pascale & Athos, 1981), disqualification (Bavelas, 1983; Bavelas & Smith, 1982), and unclarity (Wender, 1968). The distinctions among these terms have themselves been unclear, primarily due to an inconsistent view of meaning. Most writers have endorsed the *interactional* view while at the same time attempting to identify specific *messages* which are more or less ambiguous. This is an impossible task, and more than one researcher has glossed the issue by remaining vague about the locus of ambiguity, i.e., whether it resides in the source's intentions, the receiver's interpretations, or in the message itself.

Some examples will illustrate the problem. In their study of equivocal messages in organizations, Putnam and Sorenson (1982) define ambiguity both in terms of message attributes (lack of specific detail, abstract language, absence of a course of action) and receiver interpretation (perceived equivocality of the message). Bavelas and Smith (1982) and Fowler et al. (1979) both posit an ideal message which is complete and clear and examine the ways in which actual messages are disqualified (Bavelas & Smith, 1982) or deviate from this hypothetical ideal.

Unfortunately, the concept of an ideally clear message is misleading in fundamental ways. Clarity (and conversely, ambiguity) is not an attribute of

messages; it is a *relational* variable which arises through a combination of source, message, and receiver factors. Clarity exists to the extent that the following conditions are met: (1) an individual has an idea; (2) he or she encodes the idea into language; and (3) the receiver understands the message as it was intended by the source.[2] In trying to be clear, individuals take into account the possible interpretive contexts which may be brought to bear on the message by the receiver and attempt to narrow the possible interpretations. Clarity, then, is a continuum which reflects the degree to which a source has narrowed the possible interpretations of a message and succeeded in achieving a correspondence between his or her intentions and the interpretation of the receiver.

Returning now to the central argument, people in organizations do not always try to promote this correspondence between intent and interpretation. It is often preferable to omit purposefully contextual cues and to allow for multiple interpretations on the part of receivers. Furthermore, *clarity is only a measure of communicative competence if the individual has as his or her goal to be clear.*

One important implication of accepting a contextual view of meaning is that ambiguity can be engendered through detailed, literal language as well as through imprecise, figurative language. The particular message strategy chosen is not equivalent to whether an individual has been relatively clear or ambiguous. When communicating with close friends, incomplete phrases and vague references may engender high degrees of clarity, through the use of a restricted code; the same message strategies applied in less close relationships may lead to confusion and ambiguity. Conceived of in this way, ambiguity is totally independent of *perceived* ambiguity, which is a psychological variable; in fact, low levels of perceived ambiguity may often accompany high levels of strategic ambiguity, and vice versa.

A final qualification is in order. The focus of this paper is on the *strategic* use of ambiguity in organizations; as such, I am limiting the discussion to those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals. Not all communication is strategic, as evidenced by recent work on mindlessness and scripts (cf., Weick, 1983). Alternatively, ambiguity may be unrecognized (the speaker has no idea to communicate) or inadvertent (the speaker intends to be clear, but is unable to do so).

The aspect of strategic ambiguity which makes it essential to organizing is that it promotes unified diversity. This process is described in the next section.

Strategic Ambiguity Promotes Unified Diversity

Within every social system there exists a tension between the individual and the aggregate, the parts and the whole. In a free society, a balance must

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be maintained between "the requirements for dependable patterns of action and for independent initiatives" (Hollander, 1975, p. 56). This balance is closely allied to the dialectic of self-actualization and self-transcendence through others, to the individual's need to feel both a part of the social world and to develop a unique sense of self apart from the social world.

A similar balance is necessary in formal organizations. While organizations must generate sufficient consensus to survive, it is not always necessary or desirable to promote high levels of consensus among individual attitudes and goals (Weick, 1979a). In summarizing one school of organizational thought, Mohr (1983) concludes that there can be many advantages to cultivating inconsistency among goals, such as increased creativity and flexibility. The same theme appears repeatedly in the literature: How can cohesion and coordination be promoted while at the same time maintaining sufficient individual freedom to ensure flexibility, creativity, and adaptability to environmental change? This paradox has been referred to as the simultaneous seeking of self-determination and security (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and as the "unresolvable conflict" between centralization and decentralization (Pascale & Athos, 1981).

Perhaps the most elegant expression of the tension between the individual and the aggregate is given by Kant (in Becker, 1968) who argued that social systems should have as their goal "Maximum individuality within maximum community." Becker contends that this paradox makes a fitting, if unreachable goal for social systems. Contrary to traditional arguments, the "problem" of divergent goals is not always best resolved through consensus (through socialization or accommodation) but instead through the development of strategies which preserve and manage these differences.

But how can this be accomplished? One way of managing this paradox is through the creative use of symbols. Organizational values are often implicit in myths, sagas, and stories which are used as points of symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1983). Values are expressed in this form because their equivocal expression allows for multiple interpretations while at the same time promoting a sense of unity. It is therefore not the case that people are moved toward the *same* views (in any objectively verifiable sense) but rather that the ambiguous statement of core values allows them to maintain individual interpretations while at the same time believing that they are in agreement.

Strategic ambiguity fosters the existence of multiple viewpoints in organizations. This use of ambiguity is commonly found in organizational missions, goals, and plans. When organizational goals are stated concretely, they are often strikingly ineffective (Edelman, 1977). Strategic ambiguity is essential to organizing because it allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same

message—i.e., perceive the message to be clear. It is a political necessity to engage in strategic ambiguity so that different constituent groups may apply different interpretations to the symbol.

Ambiguity is used strategically to foster agreement on abstractions without limiting specific interpretations. For example, university faculty on any campus may take as their rallying point "academic freedom," while at the same time maintaining markedly different interpretations of the concept. Similarly, organizational myths (Smith & Simmons, 1983) which convey core organizational values may have a mantra-like ability to bind a group together while at the same time not limiting specific interpretations.

Focusing on organizational symbolism casts leadership in a new light as well. While a primary responsibility of leaders is to make meanings for followers (Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978; Smircich, 1983) and to infuse employees with values and purpose (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Selznick, 1957) the process of doing so is less one of consensus-making and more one of using language strategically to express values at a level of abstraction at which agreement *can* occur. If leadership is the ability to make organizational activities meaningful to members, the language required for such a task is abstract, evangelical, and even poetic (Weick, 1978). Effective leaders use ambiguity strategically to encourage creativity and guard against the acceptance of one standard way of viewing organizational reality.

Pascale and Athos (1981) make a similar observation in their discussion of "Zen and the Art of Management." When confronted with difficult decisions, managers must often "juggle" multiple goals. This juggling involves using less than explicit language, being purposefully vague, and leaving key meanings implicit. "*Vagueness in communication* can cause problems, to be sure, but it can also serve to hold strained relations together and reduce unnecessary conflict. There is too much American trust in increasing the clarity of communication between people, especially when disagreements are substantive. Getting a currently hopeless impasse clear is often unwise and likely to make things worse" (Pascale & Athos, 1981, p. 94, italics in original).

The writing of group documents provides a final example of how unified diversity can be promoted through the use of strategic ambiguity. When a group composed of individuals with divergent perspectives on a topic convenes to author a document collectively, the final product is presumed to represent the will of the group. Strategic ambiguity is often employed to make the group appear to speak in a single voice. Group members appeal to a repertoire of increasingly ambiguous legitimations which both retain the appearance of unity and reasonably represent the opinions of the group.

In the above discussion, I have taken issue with the typical emphasis on consensus in organizations. Multiple interpretations are inevitable in social

systems, and ambiguity allows for both agreement in the abstract and the preservation of diverse viewpoints. We have seen how strategic ambiguity can promote unified diversity which is essential to the process of organizing; now we turn our attention to how ambiguity functions to bring about more specific individual and organizational outcomes. The first is the facilitation of change; the second is the amplification of existing source attributions and the preservation of privileged positions. Each of these issues is discussed in detail below.

Strategic Ambiguity Facilitates Organizational Change

At the organizational level, strategic ambiguity facilitates change through shifting interpretations of organizational goals and central metaphors. At the interpersonal level, ambiguity facilitates change through the development of relationships among organizational members.

Organizational Goals and Central Metaphors

Organizational goals are articulated at many levels, from the specifics of daily operations to the general relationship of the organization to the society. One fundamental goal, regarding the image of the company as an entity, is developed both internally for organizational members and externally for organizational publics. The strategic use of ambiguity aids in the effective statement of this goal.

Organizations change when their members change their metaphors of thinking about them (Pondy, 1983). Metaphor structures our lives in pervasive and subtle ways (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ortony, 1975). According to Nisbet (1969, p. 6), revolutions in thought are quite often "no more than the mutational replacement, at certain critical points in history, of one foundation metaphor by another in man's contemplation of universe, society, and self."

Much has been written of late about the metaphors which characterize American organizations. Many writers, notably Weick (1979a), have discouraged the perpetuation of the military metaphor for organizing, with its corresponding orders, tactics, and chain of command. Numerous organizations have turned away from the military metaphor and replaced it with the family (cf. Peters & Waterman, 1982). What Kanter (1983) refers to as "strategic eras" in organizations can be launched through the careful use of metaphor; a shift from military to family, for example, could have widespread implications for behavior in the organization. The organizing strength of any central metaphor lies in the way it promotes unified diversity; individuals believe that they agree on what it means to be part of a "family," yet their actual interpretations may remain quite different.

Organizations must be ambiguous in stating goals which concern their publics. A common goal of state-supported universities is to establish a reasonable domain of concern, a limited geographical area in which services, funds, and students are exchanged. The definition of this domain is always problematic; narrow definition excludes outlying regions which may have something to offer, and overly broad definition leaves local communities feeling deserted. A rational organizational strategy is to be ambiguous, employing a statement such as, "The University shall be responsive to its surrounding areas," in public documents so as to retain flexibility to adapt to future opportunities and to satisfy multiple constituencies.

Organizational goals are expressed ambiguously to allow organizations the freedom to alter operations which have become maladaptive over time. Naisbitt (1982) argues that the question facing organizations in the 1980s is, "What business are you really in?" When air travel replaced sea travel from the United States to Europe, those cruise lines that survived did so because they defined their goals broadly as entertainment or hospitality, not narrowly as transportation. In this case, an ambiguous goal allowed these organizations to adapt by providing new types of services, such as pleasure cruises to nowhere and activities on boats that never left the dock. This characteristic of ambiguity is especially important to organizations in turbulent environments, in which ambiguous goals can preserve a sense of continuity while allowing for the gradual change in interpretation over time.

One last point deserves mention. In her analysis of innovation, Kanter (1983) reminds us that while symbols are important to organizing, they are not the whole story. The creation of inspirational, durable meanings is a crucial part of the change process, but it is not usually sufficient to sustain innovation. While endorsing the spirit of Bormann's (1983) assertion that symbolic changes can often shape technological ones, a more realistic scenario entails a mutual relationship between symbolic and technological change, of ideas and actions, of a manager's ability to operate both at the symbolic and at the practical level. "The tools of change masters are creative and interactive; they have an intellectual, a conceptual, and a cultural aspect. Change masters deal in symbols and visions and shared understanding as well as the techniques and trappings of their own specialties" (Kanter, 1983, p. 305).

Interpersonal Relationships

At the interpersonal level, strategic ambiguity can facilitate relational development. This occurs when organizational members are purposefully ambiguous and those attending to the message "fill in" what they believe to be the appropriate context and meaning. The more ambiguous the message, the greater the room for projection. When an individual projects, he or she fills in

the meaning of a message in a way which is consistent with his or her own beliefs. Projection results in greater perceived similarity between source and receiver; research has shown that perceived similarity can lead to increased attraction and hence facilitate relational development (Clore & Byrne, 1974).[3]

Strategic ambiguity can facilitate relational development through the emergence of a restricted code to which only certain individuals are privy. In organizations, jargon, nicknames, and in-jokes can serve this function. To those outside of the language community, the discourse is strange, technical, or purposefully ambiguous; to those inside, it acts as a kind of incantation, an implicit expression of loyalty to the group or organization (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Edelman, 1977). Put differently, one of the results of strategic ambiguity is that camaraderie may form among those for whom the messages are not ambiguous, who believe that their privileged interpretations qualify them as part of an in-group.

Strategic ambiguity may be used inclusively or exclusively in organizing. In the context of relational development, ambiguity may be used inclusively to build the cohesiveness of an in-group and exclusively to allow certain people access to the "correct" interpretation, while purposefully mystifying or alienating others.

Finally, co-workers may use strategic ambiguity to control what they share of their private opinions, beliefs, or feelings. This allows them to be more tactful, to avoid conflict, and to understand one another without jeopardizing the relationship. Pascale and Athos (1981) see this in terms of indirection versus "brute integrity"; particularly when we anticipate working with someone in the future, it is important to consider whether unrestricted candor is worth the price of "the listener's goodwill, open-mindedness, and receptivity to change" (Pascale & Athos, 1981, p. 102). Many relationships in social systems are noninterpersonal and rely on imprecise and incomplete information which allows untested assumptions to persist (Moore & Tumin, 1948; Parks, 1982; Weick, 1979b). As an alternative to unrestricted candor, secrecy, or living, information control is often accomplished through the strategic use of ambiguity.

In addition to facilitating change at the organizational and interpersonal levels, strategic ambiguity can also amplify existing attributions and preserve privileged positions. This use of ambiguity is examined in the next section.

Strategic Ambiguity Amplifies Existing
Source Attributions and Preserves Privileged Positions

Throughout his life, George Orwell maintained that all societies are organized upon the principle of unequal power, and that this power

differential is maintained largely through the use of language by elites (Hodge & Fowler, 1979). One common strategy for preserving existing impressions and protecting privileged positions is strategic ambiguity.

In his discussion of responses to ambiguous stimuli, Manis (1961, p. 76) states that "in interpreting an ambiguous statement or opinion, the average person would be more strikingly influenced by his own views than he would be when interpreting a non-ambiguous statement." In practice, this implies that the same communication directed at the same receiver by sources differing in credibility would be interpreted differently. While this is surely true for relatively clear communication as well, one would expect even greater distortion when ambiguous communication is considered. Beliefs tend to be self-sealing; once an initial attribution is made about an individual, the tendency is to select information which is consistent with the initial assessment. In particular, language usage is a strong determinant of receivers' inferences about sources (Bradac, Bowers, & Courtright, 1979). Ambiguous communication has been shown to amplify existing impressions (Rogers, 1978), increase the match between a reader and a literary work (Skinner, in Wilson, 1971), and help to preserve and enhance attributions of credibility (Weick, Gilfillen, & Keith, 1973; Williams & Goss, 1975).

Similar findings have been reported by attribution theorists (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). People act to maintain a consistent set of beliefs about others, and hence dispositional attributions have considerable inertia. Highly credible people have greater freedom in what they can say to maintain a positive impression. A source deemed credible who speaks ambiguously may be called a prophet, but a low-credible source speaking identically may be dubbed a fool.

In organizations, strategic ambiguity is one way in which supervisors and subordinates can take out "character insurance" in order to maintain their formal or informal standing in the company (Williams & Goss, 1975). For those who are highly credible, clarity is always risky, since it provides the receiver with new information which can result in a potentially negative reevaluation of character. For those with low credibility, the opposite is true; clear communication remains a risk, but it is one of the only ways they can improve other's impressions of them through communication. It is important to remember, however, that communicators do not always have maintenance of self-image as their primary goal. On the contrary, people are sometimes willing to lose face in order to get a particular point across. While strategic ambiguity may be thought of as a way of coping with multiple goals, the priorities individuals assign to these goals may be highly variable.

Strategically Ambiguous Communication Is Deniable

In organizations, the deniability of ambiguous communication is a key element in the maintenance of privileged positions and has both task and interpersonal implications.

Deniability of task-related communication. Strategic ambiguity in task-related communication can preserve future options. Disclosure of information in unequivocal terms limits options and may prematurely endanger plans (Bok, 1983). Examples of this are common in the realm of international politics. For example, the American ambassador to the United Nations recently stated that Central American allies are consistently too explicit in discussing their affairs, and therefore deny the U.S. the "comforts of ambiguity." Similarly, Yoder (1983) has argued that the exercise of power is impossible if political actors are denied the use of ambiguity.

Sophisticated managers seldom "lay down the law" in areas of great importance to the organization. Many supervisors who have been overly clear in setting policy have found that the slightest violation of a rule by a valued employee places the supervisor in the untenable position of having to make a good decision while remaining consistent. Ambiguity can be used to allow specific interpretations of policies which might do more harm than good to be denied, should they arise.

Rather than being entirely secretive or clear, organizational communicators often employ some form of deniable discourse, such as strategic ambiguity. What Wheelright (1968) argues to be true for expressive language is true for other forms of ambiguity as well; ambiguous communication is characterized by its "assertorial lightness" and hence is more easily denied than its less equivocal counterpart. This strategy applies to the interorganizational realm as well; in the formation of interorganizational agreements, ambiguity is called for when a clear formulation will reduce flexibility of decision-making or lead to costly commitments which are hard to terminate (Aldrich & Whetten, 1981; Gottfredson & White, 1981; Metcalfe, 1981).

Deniability of interpersonal communication. The deniable aspect of strategic ambiguity is essential to interpersonal relationships in organizations as well. Labov and Fanshel (1977) argue that people need a form of discourse which is deniable in order to communicate; if one did not exist, they claim, people would create one. Szasz (1974) contends that indirect communication serves as a useful compromise between total silence and clear, potentially offensive communication. Szasz views indirect strategies as especially common in significant relationships wherein dependency needs and monetary problems are discussed; this seems clearly applicable to superior-subordinate dyads. Indirectness works because it "permits the expression of a need and its simultaneous denial or disavowal" (Szasz, 1974, p. 141). In organizations,

strategic ambiguity helps to preserve the "close-but-not-too-close" nature of organizationally sanctioned interpersonal relationships (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) by allowing participants to express their thoughts and feelings and simultaneously to deny specific interpretations which may be especially face-threatening.

The use of strategic ambiguity complicates the task of interpretation for the receiver. For example, an individual can disclose an important piece of information ambiguously ("I feel uncomfortable in this job") and then deny specific interpretations should they arise ("You mean you can't get along with the boss?"). This interplay between ambiguous assertions and requests for clarification is common on news shows that feature interviews with politicians; interviewers attempt to narrow the interpretive context, while politicians try to retain multiple possible interpretations. By complicating the sense-making responsibilities of the receiver, strategically ambiguous communication allows the source to both reveal and conceal, to express and protect, should it become necessary to save face. While Goffman (1967) is astute in observing, "There is much to be gained in venturing nothing," there is often even more to be gained by giving the appearance of venturing something which, on closer inspection, may be made to seem like nothing.

Lastly, it is important to note that clear communication is also deniable; it is just more difficult to do so and at the same time save face. Strategic ambiguity must be viewed as a continuum, from most clear to most ambiguous; the more ambiguous the communication, the easier it is to deny specific interpretations.

Research Strategies

Thus far in this paper, I have defined strategic ambiguity and offered an explanation of how it promotes the unified diversity essential to organizing. Two pervasive applications of strategic ambiguity were described as well: the facilitation of change, and the maintenance of attributions and privileged positions. In this final section, suggestions for how these ideas might be evaluated through empirical research are presented.

In operationalizing strategic ambiguity, some popular approaches can be ruled out. Since ambiguity is defined relationally, and not as a property of messages, experiments which assign levels of ambiguity to specific messages should be avoided. Even the most literal-appearing utterance can become highly ambiguous given certain relational contexts. Alternatively, measurement of the construct requires a knowledge of communicative goals, linguistic choices, and receiver interpretation. When we know these three things, we can assess the level of correspondence between intent and

interpretation, as well as examine the linguistic forms which are used to accomplish this correspondence.

One example of this type of operationalization can be found in a recent study of superior-subordinate communication.[4] In this study, students role-playing superiors and subordinates were instructed to give negative feedback on a letter that their partner had written. Information was collected concerning their communicative goals, the message strategies they used in giving the feedback, and the interpretations and attributions of receivers. From this information, differences in ambiguity were calculated and examined in relation to message strategies chosen and overall judgments of effectiveness in superior and subordinate roles.

This study should be followed up by field investigations which distinguish among the use of ambiguity in different communicative contexts. Two important dimensions of context are the type of audience (internal or external to the organization) and the level of formality of the communication (formal or informal). A four cell matrix suggested by these dimensions is presented in Figure 1.

In Cell 1, formal internal communication, the research focus should be on how ambiguity promotes unified diversity and maintains privileged positions. Examples of this type of communication are organized goals, rules, policies and procedures; texts of these messages are likely to be available for analysis. As a result, appropriate methodologies include naturalistic and critical research in the interpretative tradition (Bantz, 1983). Naturalistic research could aim to describe how goals, policies, and procedures structure the reality-definition of organizational members. Critical research might examine how these same messages perpetuate the status quo. Linguistic analysis such as that done by Fowler et al. (1979) could be used to examine how the microscopic aspects of the texts reflect attitudes and behavior. Finally, this communicative context is especially amenable to rhetorical analysis, which would focus on the role of ambiguity in the persuasive aspects of the texts.

In Cell 2, informal internal communication, the research focus should be on how ambiguity is used in the development of interpersonal relationships. Examples of communication of this kind are conversation, group discussion, and the telling of organizational stories. Since these kinds of communication are usually oral, a successful research strategy would be discourse or conversation analysis. Informal communication could be analyzed to reveal the ways in which individuals attempt to balance among multiple interactional goals, particularly getting the job done and preserving interpersonal relationships.

More traditional work with superior-subordinate communication is also appropriate here (cf. Jablin, 1979). One approach to the study of strategic

ambiguity in this context is coorientation on communication rules (Eisenberg, Monge, & Farace, 1984; Farace et al., 1977; Poole & McPhee, 1983). Coorientation theory is well suited to the study of ambiguity since it cuts across systems levels and focuses on relational concepts such as agreement, accuracy, and perceived agreement. From the standpoint of coorientation theory, a major function of strategically ambiguous communication between superiors and subordinates may be the maintenance of metaperspectives which facilitate positive evaluation. People in organizations do not always seek consensus on rules and often avoid situations where conflicting perceptions would be apparent and might have a negative effect on relationships. If communicators balance among multiple goals, they may use strategic ambiguity to avoid exposing those areas where their attitudes diverge from others with whom they work.

In Cell 3, formal external communication, the research focus should be on the preservation of future options and the deniability of formal statements to external audiences. Examples of communication of this type are public relations campaigns, advertising and sales information, and interorganizational agreements. As in Cell 1, much of this communication is written and texts are available for naturalistic, critical, or rhetorical analysis. Theories of marketing and of the relationship between organizations and their environments (Aldrich, 1979) could also be helpful in this context.

In Cell 4, informal external communication, the focus should be on how strategic ambiguity is used to develop interorganizational linkages which

FORMALITY

	FORMAL	INFORMAL
INTERNAL	I goals, missions rules, regulations policies and procedures	II conversation group discussion organizational story-telling
EXTERNAL	III public relations advertising sales interorganizational agreements	IV informal agreements weak links "old boy" network overlapping directorates

AUDIENCE

Figure 1.1   Dimensions of Communicative Context Appropriate for the Study of Strategic Ambiguity

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are often covert and highly political. The deniable aspect of this type of communication is extremely important. Examples of communication in this context are informal agreements, weak links, and interactions in the "old-boy" network. As in Cell 2, the key issues here are those of interpersonal politics and the balancing of individual, interpersonal, and organizational goals. Unlike internal communication, however, problems specific to this context include both legal ramifications and the difficulties encountered by boundary role occupants in maintaining loyalties and eliciting trust from co-workers (Adams, 1980). Studies in this area might focus on less obvious records of interorganizational communication, such as overlapping direc-torates, membership in professional clubs and associations, and informal agreements (Eisenberg et al., in press).

Regardless of which communicative context is chosen for study, researchers should focus on three basic questions: (1) What factors influence the formation of interactional goals? (2) How do people in organizations try to accomplish these goals through communication? and (3) How are different communicative strategies interpreted by others in and outside of the organization?

Some important questions remain. Once we gather a better understanding of how people use ambiguity in organizations, how will this affect what we tell managers and employees about what constitutes effective communication? What is the pedagogy of ambiguity, and what are its ethical constraints? Empirical research on strategic ambiguity should prompt further inquiry into these and related issues.

Conclusion

The model of meaning suggested in this paper is compatible with both a more realistic and desirable conception of organizations, one in which disagreement and idiosyncrasy are not necessarily minimized, but managed. Particularly in turbulent environments, ambiguous communication is not a kind of fudging, but rather a rational method used by communicators to orient toward multiple goals. It is easy to imagine the ethical problems that might result from the misuse of ambiguity. In the final analysis, however, both the effectiveness and the ethics of any particular communicative strategy are relative to the goals and values of the communicators in the situation. The use of more or less ambiguity is in itself not good or bad, effective or ineffective; whether a strategy is ethical depends upon the ends to which it is used, and whether it is effective depends upon the goals of the individual communicators.

As long as organizational scholars regard ambiguity as deviational rather than as contributing to normal interaction, they will remain unenlightened about the most dramatic aspects of organizations, those instances of communication which most influence our lives (Branham, 1980). Wheelright's (1968) commentary on metaphor and myth can be extended to apply to ambiguity:

> The metaphor and myth are necessary expressions of the human psyche's most central energy-tension; without it . . . mankind would succumb to the fate that the Forgotten Enemy holds ever in store for us, falling from the ambiguous grace of being human into the unisignative security of the reacting mechanism. (p. 123)

It is a common observation that humans are both social and symbolic animals. What is less frequently recognized is that the strategic use of symbols can facilitate the operation of the social order. We should turn our attention toward how this is accomplished in organizations.

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Notes

1. An example of this perspective is given by Putnam and Jones (1982) in their discussion of the role of communication in bargaining. They conclude from the literature that open, honest communication is not a prerequisite for cooperation; in fact, more flexible commitment communicated via tentative, indirect language led to reciprocal concessions, whereas more firm commitments led to conflict escalation.

2. This definition is taken in part from a program of research Karen Tracy and I are conducting on the use of clarity in multiple goal situations.

3. Although he diverges from the definition of ambiguity offered in this paper, Cohen (1978) presents an intriguing argument about the relationship between metaphor and intimacy:

> There is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another. Three aspects are involved: (1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer extends

a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community. All three are involved in any communication, but in ordinary literal discourse their involvement is so pervasive and routine that they go unmarked. (p. 6)

4. This is the first in a series of studies mentioned in Note 2.

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