

EXPLORING A NEW MODEL OF COMMUNICATION, AND SOME POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR AOTEAROA-NEW ZEALAND

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This paper proposes a view of human communication and interaction that is rather different from the dominant model – which in today's world is a telecom-based scenario, based on a sender, a message, and a recipient. The model put forward here is based on the idea of a primal inchoate unity that is then disrupted, taking the myth of Ranginui and Papatūānuku as the image of that disruption.

Cet article propose une analyse différente du modèle dominant en vigueur dans la description du processus de communication et des conséquences de l'interaction humaine. Illustrant son propos par la légende de Ranginui et Papatūānuku sur la création du monde et dépassant le système classique qui met en rapport celui qui envoie un message, le contenu de celui-ci et un destinataire, le modèle retenu par l'auteur est basé sur l'idée de l'existence d'une unité primitive inchoate dont le contenu est ensuite progressivement modifié.

In Māori mythology, the primal couple Rangī (Sky-Father) and Papa (Earth Mother), also called Ranginui and Papatūānuku, refer to the first primordial loving pair who were once locked in a perpetual conjugal embrace. They conceived many children, all male, who lived in the cramped darkness between them. As their children grew, they began to discuss among themselves what it would be like to live in the light. After many attempts to create some space, Tāne, god of forests and birds, forced his parents apart, by lying on his back and pushing with his strong legs.

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Stretching every sinew Tāne pushes and pushes until, with cries of grief and surprise, Ranginui and Papatūānuku are prised apart.¹

This paper proposes a view of human communication and interaction that is rather different from the dominant model – which in today's world is a telecom-based scenario, based on a sender, a message, and a recipient. According to this telecom-based view, the actions taking place are intentional, carried out between distinct participants using the required, consciously chosen, pieces of information. In many cases the intention will be to bring the entities closer together, either emotionally or simply because on completion of the communication an informational community has been formed between them.

The model put forward here is based on the idea of a primal inchoate unity that is then disrupted, taking the Rangi and Papa myth as the image of that disruption.

Heidegger in particular has identified a number of "separations" (*Scheidung*) that have taken place in language and thought from ancient times until now.² But I prefer to evoke the myth of Rangi and Papa in this context. According to this myth there is a primal inchoate unity, but differentiation and potential for distinct entities are then created as a painful and difficult process, by forcing the primal couple apart and creating space for their progeny. But the distinct entities so created still have a residual sense of their former unity.

Hence unity has been transformed into difference, sameness into otherness. Now, human communication often calls for the management of otherness and difference, as clearly illustrated by issues facing the translator working into English.

Think of the German word *Standort* often seen on a map. The dictionary meaning is "location", but what it tells the reader is "you are here", ie "your location". So the German text implicitly belongs to the reader, the recipient of the message. The English word "location" on its own, on the other hand, would not denote anyone's location, and indeed might not denote anything at all. As the translator, I need to manage the "other, different from the reader and speaker" feel, and translate as "you are here".

Now for a couple of rather different examples. When translating a book from Finnish into English a few years ago, I was contacted at the last minute by the authors, asking me if they could insert a paragraph as follows (more or less): "Finland declared its independence in 1917. The First World War caused many upheavals in

1 Adapted from "Rangi and Papa." *New World Encyclopedia*, 27 Jul 2019, 21:09 UTC. 5 Apr 2022, 08:33 <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Rangi_and_Papa&oldid=1022305>.

2 See M Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, Tübingen 1953.

Europe". I told them this would not work in English: it should be rephrased as "Among the many upheavals flowing from the First World War was Finland's declaration of independence in 1917", or some such.

Here the interaction, in terms of the implied level of implied ownership relationship, was primarily within the text, between the two sentences (rather than between communication participants and content of the text). In English I had to make that ownership explicit, whereas presumably in Finnish it would have been implicit in the form presented to me.

But by restoring the interaction between the textual elements, I was also restoring the desired communication interaction between the text and the reader. The semantic disconnect created by the version suggested by the Finnish authors would in turn have created a psychological disconnect between the text and the reader – and by resolving the former I have already palliated the latter.

And for my third example, consider the rather remarkable use of "today" in "Would you like anything else with that today?", frequently heard from waitresses in Wellington coffee bars. Most other languages would not use "today" here. So what is happening?

Here I recall a Russian friend's remark that the weird thing in New Zealand is that people you don't know keep smiling at you. My interpretation of this is that this compulsive smiling must result from apprehension that a neutral attitude might be threatening. In the same way, a yes/no question such as "would you like anything else with that?" would presumably have some sort of threatening effect, so "today" is added as a softener.

In this case the "otherness" problem is primarily directly between "me" and "you" – the conventional smile, like the apparently superfluous adverb, is used to create a measure of togetherness between the parties.

This means we have similar issues 1) between communication participants and texts; 2) between textual elements and other textual elements; and 3) between one communication participant and another (you and me). This would seem to indicate that you, I and information (words and the concepts and things they represent) are all, in some sense, the same sort of thing (even though we seem to be quite different). From the foregoing it is possible to reach some far-reaching metaphysical conclusions:

Before, or at, the origin of, life and communication there must have been a state of unity/oneness, with knowledge somehow contained within that single entity;

Then comes some sort of outward push (which is where the Rangi and Papa myth comes in), whereby

1) we (human beings) become at least partly distinct from one another; and
2) each of us now interacts with *external information* (as opposed to *knowledge held within*), that has to be acquired, learned, internalised.

We might imagine a continuum here, from:

- (1) Animal species such as migratory birds, bees and ants, who operate as a community and seem to instinctively know what to do; to
- (2) Indigenous societies, where the collective is still more important than the individual, and belief/knowledge outweighs science/information; and on to
- (3) Western societies, where individual rights outweigh the collective, and science/information starts to take pride of place over knowledge/belief; and in particular
- (4) Anglo-American societies, where this preponderance as expressed in our language seems to be extreme (as I have argued elsewhere).³

Yet, at every point on the continuum, we still retain a greater or lesser vestigial awareness of community, belief and belonging. Furthermore, on the micro level we are constantly travelling up and down the continuum.

The prising apart process was therefore incomplete – and it was also painful. This means that in fact, we are not fully distinct individuals, but unstable, only partly distinct blobs or entities, insubstantial orphan or ghost figures, constantly being made, remade and changed by the information we interact with, just as that information is changed by its interactions with us. And by the same token, the information blobs floating around us are just the pale shadow of the power and certainty of the internal knowledge that was available before. But the central point from this perspective is that you and me and the information we exchange can all be regarded as communication entities of more or less equal status – as opposed to a situation of sovereign "me" entities who use subordinated words and information as they choose.

The way in which "I" am changed by information is obvious and fascinating in childhood, and equally obvious but tragic in some cases at the end of life, but presumably the same process is also happening constantly if imperceptibly throughout our so-called adult lives. Thus there is no "me" without information, and

3 John Jamieson "My Language Made Me Do It' – The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis Revisited for the Context of Aotearoa-New Zealand" (2021) 26 CLJP 283.

no information without "me" – we are two aspects of the same thing (just as space and time are ultimately space-time).

And our languages appear to encode the degree of separation between these communication entities, or how clearly they are delineated with respect to each other, with less separation and delineation in the "default position" in, say, Greek or Māori than in English. The emergence of human language(s) presumably either itself is, or closely reflects, our progressive separation from whatever the primal oneness was.

So this is where our modified model of communication might come in. Rather than man being the measure of all things, and manipulating communication elements intentionally to achieve certain purposes (as the telecommunications model would have it), the situation would be much more random. Given that the ownership or togetherness relationships involved in the above examples are between 1) participants and text; 2) text elements and text elements; and 3) communication participants, we as humans are not engaged in manipulating something different from the world around us, but rather interacting with the world from the inside, as like to like. Perhaps we are all in this together.

As an RNZ National radio announcer percipiently commented, "don't text me to say you are 'held up in traffic' – you are the traffic".⁴

I have argued here and elsewhere that in spite of movement up and down the sameness/otherness continuum that takes place all the time in all languages, the default position is that a sharper distinction and a clearer separation between the communication "blobs" (ie you and me and words and ideas) is present in English than elsewhere. So let us look in somewhat greater detail at some of what this might imply.

If I (as an English speaker) am more different from you, just as you are more different from "they" than would be the case for speakers of other languages, then the things in our world will also be more clearly distinct and separate from each other; and we collectively (as English speakers) will be more separate from the world we live in than speakers of other languages are.

Now this situation could well be reflected in some of the debates currently playing out in public opinion in New Zealand.

1. In terms of property ownership, the structures of English could imply a greater degree of parcellisation, so to speak, between you and me as individuals and between individual assets that we might seek to own; a more personal and particular bond

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between owner and assets; and a clearer distinction between owner (a person) and the owned (a thing). Hence the recent history-making recognition of the legal personality of the Whanganui river could be seen as reflecting quite a precise difference between Māori and Pākehā linguistic and cultural structures – and more particularly a shift in favour of the Māori view of things.

2. The four stages of emergence from primal unity outlined above could shed some light on the jousting within the scientific community between proponents of "science" on the one hand and *mātauranga Māori* on the other. The two bodies of knowledge might well be seen not as opposites, but as different stages on the path from (internally held) knowledge to (externally acquired) information. Many domains of the social sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) are frequently informed by constructivist paradigms that readily admit that the researcher is part and parcel of the reality he or she is investigating, in which case there is no reason to see any conflict with *mātauranga Māori*.

The hard sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), on the other hand, might well be seen to require a (fictitious) split or alienation between researcher and researched that would not be consistent with *te ao Māori* perspectives or methodologies. Yet just as the separation between Rangi and Papa is not complete, the social sciences are not irremediably constructivist, and the hard sciences are not exclusively positivist – they are both worthy endeavours at slightly different points on the path that all peoples, and languages, are travelling, and must travel.

3. And last but not least, what of the current restless drive towards the use of some Māori greetings and phrases by non-speakers of the language on Radio New Zealand (and presumably other broadcasting outlets I am not familiar with)? This is clearly an excellent thing, which has drawn little but positive comment among the people I talk to about it.

Yet it could be that some of the motivations for undertaking this effort are again based on considerations inherent in the structures of English.

We are seeking to display awareness and sensitivity by actually "doing" Māori, by acquiring this or that turn of phrase and actively inserting it at the appropriate moment. I as a non-Māori speaker am appropriating (a small part of) the "other" (the Māori language) and using it for the desired effect.

Personally, I have preferred to follow a rather different path towards addressing this linguistic challenge – which I admit is not feasible for use by radio announcers, and is based on my own predilection for the study of languages:

In Māori grammar a distinction is made between entities that I can own and manipulate (*tāku* possession) and entities that can own and manipulate me (*tōku* possession). Thus children are *tāku* possessions, and parents are *tōku* possessions.

Now the phrase "te reo" (language) is a *tōku* possession – my language defines, informs and imbues me rather than being a possession for me to operate and manipulate as I choose. And indeed I have found it to be much more satisfying to read and study the Bible in Māori, to allow my mind to be impacted, and hopefully changed, by this encounter with the very different linguistic structures I am absorbing in the process.

So rather than striving to master, acquire and "have" some individual fragments of Māori, my project is to confront and absorb the language and its structures as they present themselves to me. This will ideally have the effect of remaking and reshaping the "blob" that is me. In other words, the goal is not to "have", but to "be".

A conclusion to the above might read as follows. Human communication is commonly seen as a process taking place between sovereign individuals, through the exchange of consciously formulated information units. Such a model implies a positivist epistemological stance – "I" am clearly distinct from the world around me, which I experience in objective terms and manipulate accordingly.

I have suggested a different model, in which "I" am not a sovereign individual, but am constantly being remade in my interactions with my fellow-human beings and pieces of information. We and the information we interact with are somehow all of a piece, all of the same status, and may not be fully distinct from one another. The boundaries between the "blobs" are blurred to a greater or lesser degree, and at times may disappear altogether. This stance is more consistent with a constructivist position, whereby I am an integral part of my world, and have no separate vantage point from which I can perceive it.

By referring to the Rangī and Papa myth, it is possible to see the positivist view as having emerged from the constructivist stance, which in turn has emerged from some sort of primal, inchoate unity (about which it is difficult to say anything meaningful whatsoever).

I believe that this view of human communication may provide a fresh perspective on some topical issues in New Zealand today.