Suppose I were to walk among you with a serving dish on which were a number of slices of what appeared to be a white meat. I tell you that this is a specially prepared new dish that I would like you to try. Would you take a piece and try it?

Suppose I were to tell you that it was chicken, prepared in a new way - would you be more inclined to try it then? Suppose I were to tell you that it was rattlesnake meat - what then?

Notice two things about this. First, the food substance does not change, only the label. Yet what we call it makes a difference in our response to the request. And this leads to the second idea - that part of our response to words and to things is emotional; that is, on the basis of how we feel about them. Another way of saying this is to say that we "hear" with the heart as well as with the mind.

E. T. Hall tells the interesting story of what happened to a new agricultural extension agent working among the Taos Indians in Southwestern United States a few years ago. The Taos are a very independent people who carefully guard their culture from the white man, even to keeping their way of saying "thank you" a secret. This value system, quite naturally, made extremely difficult any working with them by government representatives. But after much trial, a young agent was found who liked the Taos and who was careful to approach them slowly. All went well for awhile, but in the spring the agent found that the Indians seemed not to like him any more and would no longer do the things he suggested. After some investigation and much thought, an older man who had once lived among the Taos discovered that the young agent had been advocating a program of early spring plowing. What he didn't know, and had not been told, was that the Taos consider Mother Earth to be pregnant in the spring. To protect the surface of the earth they do not drive their wagons to town; they take the shoes off their horses, and they even refuse to wear hard-soled shoes themselves.

Hall also tells of a case where Arab villagers in a certain country refused to let outsiders clean up a water hole contaminated with typhoid. The villagers, it seemed, liked the water the way it was. It had a nice strong taste from the camels. It made the men who drank it strong and brave or fertile or smart, as the case might be. They saw no relationship between the water and disease. If babies died that was the will of God and who were they to tamper with that?

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The point of all this is that people respond to communication in terms of value and attitude systems as well as in terms of reason and logic. In fact, value and attitude systems probably play the major role most of the time. Consider this story from one of the participants in this conference:

A student who had received a bachelor's degree in her own country strongly resisted taking any undergraduate courses in an American university where she was enrolled as a graduate student. She felt she would lose face by doing so, and the appeal that she needed the background for her graduate courses had little effect.

Another story from this conference concerns a Scandinavian student living in the home of the home economics dean. There had been no definition of the student's responsibility in the home, but the dean assumed that she would assist in housekeeping since no one was being employed for that purpose. Over a period of several months there was no housekeeping help at all and considerable friction developed -- but no communication. Other housing was found for the student. What had been operating here, it seems, was the student's strong culturally based feeling that she would insult her hostess by doing household chores. For her to have helped with the housekeeping would have indicated that she did not approve of the way her hostess was managing the home!

Still another example of the role value systems play in communication, and of the way these systems vary from culture to culture, is shown in the varying approaches to disciplining a misbehaving child. Notice what the mother says in each of the countries listed, and what the words imply:

United States and English speaking countries, Italy, Greece -- "Be good!" The English speaking child that misbehaves is bad; it is naughty; it is wicked.

France -- "Be wise!" The French speaking child that misbehaves is not bad, it is foolish; it is imprudent; it is injudicious.

Scandinavian Countries -- "Be friendly; be kind!" The Scandinavian child that misbehaves is unfriendly, unkind, uncooperative.

Germany -- "Be in line!" The misbehaving German child is not conforming; he's out of step, out of line.

Hopi Indians -- "No, no, no, that is not the Hopi way!" Hopi is the right thing, the proper way to do things, the way the affairs of the tribe, and indeed of the universe, are managed. The misbehaving Hopi child is not bad, nor imprudent, nor unfriendly, nor quite out of line. He is not on the Hopi way. He is not in step with the Hopi view of destiny and of life.

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2 From the recording "Word in Your Ear, part of the NAEB series Ways of Mankind, distributed by the Audiovisual Center, Indiana University."
Another notion or concept can be drawn from these examples — words and events don't have meaning; people do. There are no meanings inherent in words or in the objects and events in the world. There are only meanings in people, meanings that are evoked by words and by events. Remember the story one participant at the conference told about introducing a doctor as her friend to villagers in another country?

Consider the enormous difference between what we usually imply when we use the word "tomorrow" and what a Latin American may mean when he uses the word "manana." Yet the two words are often uncritically thought of as equivalents! Or remember the story of the Arab diplomat recently arrived in the U.S. who attended a banquet that lasted for several hours. After the affair, he met a fellow countryman and suggested that they go find a restaurant where he could get something to eat. He was starved! His fellow countryman laughed. "Don't you know, my friend," he said, "that when you say 'no thank you' over here they think you mean it?" It is different than in his home country, where etiquette demands polite refusal several times while the host repeatedly urges acceptance of the food.

But if the notion that meanings are in people sounds ridiculously simple, think of all the ways people have of telling us that they don't really believe it:

"You don't mean that's blue — you mean it's black."
"I mean just exactly what I said."
"That's not the right word — the right one is ---"
"But that isn't what you said!"
"If you'd only say what you mean."
"But I told you!"

The meanings that people have arise out of their experiences — experiences with objects, with time and space, with happenings, with words, with other people. Part of this meaning is a kind of knowing; part of it is a feeling. It is a complex of what one thinks the world is like and what he prefers and prefers not to do in it. Because no two people have exactly the same experiences, it follows that the meanings each has are uniquely his own.

From this, I think you can see that communication must proceed in terms of both the sender's and the receiver's meanings, never in terms of the sender's alone. Communication can be thought of as a process of evoking meanings in people. Effective communication, then, is the achieving of communication objectives — of evoking the meanings that were desired. And this can be determined only by inference from people's behavior — the extent to which verbal or action responses — now or later — are the ones desired.

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3Cited by Leonard Feinberg, page 103 of this report.
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