8. Ishin-denshin, Sign system and Small talk

8.1 Ishin-denshin

 Ishin-denshin (以心伝心?) originally comes from a Chinese proverb and is a Japanese idiom which denotes the traditional concept of interpersonal communication through unspoken mutual understanding. This four-character compound, known as a yojijukugo, literally translates as "what the mind thinks, the heart transmits." Sometimes explained in English in terms of "telepathy" or "sympathy", ishin-denshin is also commonly rendered as "heart-to-heart communication" or "tacit understanding." Ishin-denshin is present in every society on Earth in the way people look at each other and go through a variety of nonverbal gestures peculiar to their nationality, ethnicity or shared cultural background. Learned non-verbal cues require a community or culture for their reinforcement; table manners are not innate capabilities upon birth. Human children's skills of shared intentionality develop gradually during the first 14 months of life as two ontogenetic pathways intertwine, so the developmental outcome is children's ability to construct dialogic cognitive representations, which enable them to participatet in human collective cognition.

Although silent understanding is generally recognized as a universal human phenomenon, the expression ishin-denshin is often used to describe this style of nonverbal communication between two people that is felt by some Japanese to be unique to the Japanese race. Whereas the Japanese concept of haragei denotes a deliberate form of non-verbal communication, ishin-denshin refers to a passive form of shared understanding. Ishin-denshin is traditionally perceived by the Japanese as sincere, silent communication via the heart or belly (i.e. symbolically from the inside, uchi), as distinct from overt communication via the face and mouth (the outside, soto), which is seen as being more susceptible to insincerities. Such concepts are related to the traditions of Zen, where the term ishin-denshin refers to direct mind transmission.

Ishin-denshin continues to influence many aspects of contemporary culture, ranging from business practices to end-of-life care. Research supports the view that Ishin-denshin is a mechanism for norm regulation that does not rely on explicit information exchange or costly reinforcement, but rather on the sensitivity of group members to social cues in their environment which can signal a threat to one's inclusionary status in the group and (as in Japan) motivate people to shift their attitudes to be in line with group social norms.

Western need for clarity in interpersonal communication are often described as repellent by Japanese people who believe themselves more accustomed to ishin-denshin and implicit rather than explicit forms of understanding.

8.2 Sign system

A sign system is a key concept in semiotics and is used to refer to any system of signs and relations between signs. The term language is frequently used as a synonym for a sign-system. However, the term sign-system is preferable to the term language for a number of reasons. First, the use of the term language tends to carry with it connotations of human language, particularly human spoken language. Human spoken language is only one example of a sign-system; albeit probably one of the most complex sign-systems known. For example, in traditional forms of face-to-face communication, humans communicate through non-verbal as well as verbal sign-systems; colloquially referred to as body language. Hence, humans communicate a great deal by way of facial movements and other forms of bodily expression. Such expressions are also signs and an organized collection of such signs would be considered a sign system. Second, the same concept of a sign-system can be used in considering a vast range of communication forms such as animal communication and man-machine communication. Examination of simpler forms of such systems of signs within non-human communication can help to illuminate some of the essence of communication and in particular can help to provide tentative answers to the question of the nature and function of communication.

8.3 Small talk

Small talk is an informal type of discourse that does not cover any functional topics of conversation or any transactions that need to be addressed.

Small talk is conversation for its own sake. The phenomenon of small talk was initially studied in 1923 by Bronisław Malinowski, who coined the term "phatic communication" to describe it. The ability to conduct small talk is a social skill; hence, small talk is some type of social communication. Early publications assume networked work positions as suitable for social communication.

8.3.1 Purpose

In spite of seeming to have little useful purpose, small talk is a bonding ritual and a strategy for managing interpersonal distance. It serves many functions in helping to define the relationships between friends, work colleagues, and new acquaintances. In particular, it helps new acquaintances to explore and categorize each other's social position. Small talk is closely related to the need for people to maintain positive face — to feel approved-of by those who are listening to them. It lubricates social interactions in a very flexible way, although the desired function is often dependent on the point in the conversation at which the small talk occurs:

1.Conversation opener; When the talkers do not know each other, it allows them to show that they have friendly intentions and desire some sort of positive interaction. In a business meeting, it enables people to establish each other's reputation and level of expertise. Where there is already a relationship between the two talkers, their small talk serves as a gentle introduction before engaging in more functional topics of conversation. It allows them to signal their own mood and to sense the mood of the other person.

2.At the end of a conversation; Sudden ending an exchange may risk appearing to reject the other person. Small talk can be used to mitigate that rejection, affirm the relationship between the two people, and soften the parting.

3.Space filler to avoid silence; in many cultures, silences between two people are usually considered uncomfortable. Tension can be reduced by starting phatic talk until a more substantial subject arises. Generally, humans find prolonged silence uncomfortable, and sometimes unbearable. This can be due to human evolutionary history as a social species, as in many other social animals silence is a communicative sign of potential danger.

In some conversations there is no specific functional or informative element at all. The following example of small talk is between two colleagues who pass each other in a hallway:

William: Morning, Paul. Paul: Oh, morning, William, how are you? William: Fine, thanks. Have a good weekend? Paul: Yes, thanks. Catch you later. William: OK, see you.

In this example, the elements of phatic talk at the beginning and end of the conversation have merged. The entire short conversation is a space-filler. This type of discourse is often called chatter.

The need to use small talk depends upon the nature of the relationship between the people having the conversation. Couples in an intimate relationship can signal their level of closeness by a lack of small talk. They can comfortably accept silence in circumstances that would be uncomfortable for two people who were only casual friends.

In workplace situations, small talk tends to occur mostly between workers on the same level. However, it can be used by managers as a way of developing the working relationships with the staff who report to them. A boss who asks their employees to work overtime may try to motivate them by using small talk to temporarily decrease their difference in status. The balance between functional conversation and small talk in the workplace depends on the context, and is also influenced by the relative power of the two speakers. It is usually the superior who defines the conversation, because they have the power to close the small talk and "get down to business."

8.3.2 Topics

The topics of small talk conversations are generally less important than their social function. The selected topic usually depends on any pre-existing relationship between the two people, and the circumstances of the conversation. In either case, someone initiating small talk will tend to choose a topic for which they can assume a shared background knowledge, to prevent the conversation being too one-sided.

Topics can be summarised as being either direct or indirect. Direct topics include personal observations such as health or looks. Indirect topics refer to a situational context such as the latest news, or the conditions of the communicative situation. Some topics are considered to be "safe" in most circumstances:

The weather

Music

Television and films

Sports

The level of detail offered should not overstep the bounds of interpersonal space. When asked, "How are you?" by an acquaintance they do not know well, a person is likely to choose a simple, generalized reply such as, "I am good, thank you." In this circumstance it would probably not be appropriate for them to reply with a list of symptoms of any medical conditions they were suffering from. To do so would

assume a greater degree of familiarity between the two people than is actually the case, and this may create an uncomfortable situation.

8.3.3 Conversational patterns

A study of small talk in situations which involve the chance meeting of strangers has been carried out by Klaus Schneider. He theorizes that such a conversation consists of a number of fairly predictable segments, or "moves".

The first move is usually phrased so that it is easy for the other person to agree. It may be either a question, or a statement of opinion with a tag question. For example, an opening line such as "Lovely weather, isn't it?" is a clear invitation for agreement.

The second move is the other person's response. In functional conversations that address a particular topic, Grice's Maxim of Quantity suggests that responses should contain no more information than was explicitly asked for. Schneider claims that one of the principles of small talk contradicts the Maxim of Quantity. He suggests that politeness in small talk is maximized by responding with a more substantial answer. Going back to the example of "Lovely weather, isn't it?", to respond factually by just saying "Yes" (or even "No") is less polite than saying, "Yes, very mild for the time of year".

Schneider describes that subsequent moves may involve an acknowledgement such as "I see", a positive evaluation such as "That's nice", or what's called "idling behavior", such as "Mmm", or "Really?".

8.3.4 Gender differences

Speech patterns between women tend to be more collaborative than those of men, and tend to support each other's involvement in the conversation. Topics for small talk are more likely to include compliments about some aspect of personal appearance. For example, "That dress really suits you." Small talk between women who are friends may also involve a greater degree of self-disclosure. Topics may cover more personal aspects of their life, their troubles, and their secrets. This self-disclosure both generates a closer relationship between them and is also a signal of that closeness.

By contrast, men's small talk tends to be more competitive. It may feature verbal sparring matches, playful insults, and putdowns. However, in a way these are also both creators and signals of solidarity; the men are signaling that they are

comfortable enough with each other's company to be able to say these things without them being taken as insults.

8.3.5 Cultural differences

Small talk rules and topics can differ widely between cultures. Weather is a common topic in regions where the climate has great variation and can be unpredictable. Questions about the family are usual in some Asian and Arab countries. In cultures or contexts that are status-oriented, such as China and Japan, small talk between new acquaintances may feature questions that enable social categorization of each other. In many European cultures it is common to discuss the weather, politics or the economy, although in some countries personal finance issues such as salary are considered taboo.