Explicit and Implicit

Listeners or readers who don't understand a communication don't know if the failure is theirs or the sender's. If the communication is oral, however, sender and receiver can talk together and find out, in effect, whose hidden assumptions impede the message. But if the communication is written, the reader cannot let the author know what he doesn't understand so that the author can cast her ideas another way or make more explicit her intent and content. Such a situation puts a premium on the sender's judging right *the first time* around. She has to be aware enough of her possible egocentricity to *predict* the problems a reader may have in understanding what she's trying to say. It puts a premium on the reader's getting the meaning *on one attempt* by the author.

Both efforts require awareness of similarity and difference between sender and receiver. If the receiver knew everything the sender plans to tell him, the communication wouldn't be needed in the first place. So some discrepancy must be assumed. Yet both have to assume they already share a great deal, or else the author would have to fill in a whole culture's worth of background before she could begin to make her particular points. Here's the crux of the verbalization issues. How much detail people need to make explicit in communicating depends on how much they can assume a receiver shares with them certain factual knowledge, frameworks of understanding, and values. The less the difference between the speaker and listener, the less detail is needed. Tolstoy said that lovers talk in mumbled fragments because they know so well already what's on each other's mind that they need to convey very little.

One of the indications of maturity is the ability of a speaker to predict what different receivers will need to have made explicit for them and what they will understand without elaboration. The small child will expect you to know who Charlie is when he refers to him, whereas an older person will throw in an appositive like "Charlie, my wife's brother, . . ." This is how sentence structure and other language forms grow as a result of growth in awareness of differences. For their part, receivers must anticipate that some parts of the communication are omitted and assumed, and they must be prepared to fill them in.

An eighteen-month-old child may have to use the single word "Juice" to say "Give me some juice," "Is that my juice?" or "I'm drinking juice." An adult too may employ "Juice" as a whole utterance, in response to the question, for example, "What are you going to serve to drink?" His answer is really, "I am going to serve juice."

For both infant and adult in these cases, the subject and the predicate of the unfinished sentence are implied and have to be "understood." The adult's "Juice" can indeed be understood from the context the conversation creates, but the context for the infants' "Juice" resides only in his mind, and his utterance remains obscure or ambiguous unless the listener can infer his meaning from the context of the child's action toward the juice as he speaks.

The adult could, if pressed, replace "Juice" with the whole statement it stands for, but the infant has no choice, because (1) he cannot yet sort out his global states of mind into parts that fit the parts of speech used to make sentences, (2) he has not yet figured out the different parts of speech and how to put them together to make statements, and (3) he is unaware of the ambiguity and of the listener's need for elaboration. It is likely that all three grow along together, if unevenly, and that any differentiating of one sort—parts of thought, parts of speech, or speaker from listener—will bring along differentiating of another.

In verbalizing her experience for a listener, a speaker is making explicit for herself as well as her listener what until then was a cloudy impression made up of many details she had not singled out in her mind. In uttering the experience she differentiates it into aspects that *fit language*—subjects, actions, objects, time, place, manner, and so on. Eventually she becomes more expert at expressing similar experiences, because language breaks experience down into only so many classes and relations, but even as a very mature speaker later in life she will have trouble making some new experiences explicit because she has not yet tried to parcel them into language. Experience that is especially hard to shape into language may get ignored even by the experiencer, since not making it explicit for others in speech may cause her to remain unaware of it also. So growth in explicitness is relative to the nature of the experience—the less common, the harder to verbalize.

All this is not to say that making thought explicit is always and automatically a good thing. In the first place, as I said, it is impossible in any one communication situation to make *everything* explicit. Some things must be assumed—either some frameworks, on the one hand, or some details, on the other. The receivers have to draw some conclusions and supply some illustrations themselves. Furthermore, besides being unavoidable to some degree, implicitness is the main mode of the highest language expression—literature. So in an exact parallel to the simultaneous growth toward generalization and elaboration, people develop at once along the reversed directions of explicitness and implicitness.

Growth Sequence 5: Toward increasingly sensitive judgment about when explicitness or implicitness is more appropriate in composing and comprehending.