

THIS ABOVE ALL

Presidential Address

Frank E.X. Dance
November 5, 1982

The subject of the centrality of the spoken word in the communication of ethics and values ties together last year's convention theme of "The Centrality of the Spoken Word," with this year's convention theme of "Communication, Ethics, and Values."

The topic of the centrality of the spoken word in the communication of ethics and values also bears directly on one of the longest standing, and yet unfortunately almost always current, disciplinary concerns, namely, the confusion of ourselves (and thus of others) as to exactly who "we" are. The confusion of ourselves (and thus of others) as to exactly what constitutes the subject matter essence of our discipline. The confusion of ourselves (and thus of others) as to exactly what constitutes our own *self*.

The search of our *self*, for our center, has so intrigued us that only a few years ago our annual convention theme was "A Center That Holds." I would like to suggest that the novelist Peter Matthiessen was correct when in *The Snow Leopard* he stated that "The center does not hold because we search for it outside, instead of in . . .". [Matthiessen, 1978, p. 235]

This seemingly endless search for our own true *self* is manifested in our continuing concern as to the most appropriate name by which our discipline and our departments should be known. This troubling search is also manifested in the current serious problems faced in some colleges and universities by our departments. This troubling quest is also reflected in our continuing struggle for disciplinary recognition and appreciation at the elementary and secondary levels.

Who are we?

Could it be possible that we are what others suggest we are? A discipline manque, a failed discipline, a false discipline? A false discipline rightfully considered trivial and thus rightfully denied an equal place, or any place at all, among the council of subject matters considered central to education at any level. Experience and research indicate that an individual can come to believe what they hear said about themselves by others if others say it often enough and loud enough. It is certainly conceivable that through listening to others we may come to doubt our own disciplinary *self* and to toy with accepting the opinion others have expressed and continue to express that we are false.

Tradition, experience, and research amply support the contention that the development of an individual *self* and self-concept is initially rooted in the act of speech and is sustained by speech communication. [Howe, 1963; Zak-Dance, 1979] What is more, the degree of esteem in which we hold our own self-concept is also initially rooted in and conveyed through speech communi-

cation. Initially self-concept and self-esteem are products of the act of speech and the process of speech communication. Spoken language shapes the self and it is through spoken language in the act of speech communication that the individual's interiority, the individual's *self* is revealed to others. [Dance, 1973; Ong, 1967] This capacity for sharing with others one's innermost thoughts, beliefs, and feelings is seemingly unique to humans. This *self*, formed and shaped in speech and in spoken language; revealed and shared through speech communication; is a *human self*, a *self* competent to perform human acts.

A human act generally is considered to be an act involving intentional choice. Accidental acts, unintentional acts, or forced acts are generally not considered to be human acts. Human acts are intentional acts, acts involving freedom of choice. During the Nuremberg trials after the second world war the defendants' lawyers argued their clients could not be held responsible or accountable for their wartime acts because those acts were the result of the defendants obeying military orders, of the defendants following the orders of others. Thus, the argument went, the individual acts were not voluntary, not intentional, and thus not subject to punishment. As we remember this defense was disallowed since it was held that the defendants were governed by a prior morality and ethic, common to the human race, which preempted any requirement to follow and fulfill the inhumane orders of their superiors. Those charged with heinous crimes, but judged to be insane at the time of the crime, are also not generally held to be responsible or accountable for their acts since the acts were not the result of intentional choice on their part. We do not generally hold someone responsible or culpable for an action performed by the person when the person was mentally incapable of an informed decision or when the person was under the influence of inescapable and irresistible circumstances such as drugs or torture. We have just witnessed the expression of this national ethical stance in the trial of John Hinckley for the attempted assassination of the President.

Heroic acts are also judged by the same characteristic of the presence of intentional choice on the part of the person being acclaimed a hero or heroine.

A human *self* is a sine qua non of a human act. The human *self* finds its origins in speech and in spoken language. The human *self* finds its esteem in speech communication. A human act requires both a human *self* and "choice."

I would like to suggest that the human *self's* opportunity to make a "choice" is also rooted in the speech act and its sequelae. Speech leads to the development of the symbol and the symbol is absolutely necessary for the development of choice. [Dance, 1982a, 1982b] We can only choose if there are alternatives from among which to choose. If we can only do one thing, then no

choice is involved. Choice necessitates being able to step aside from the instant and to see more than a single possibility for action. This capacity for decentering and displacement is a result of the development of spoken symbols. Developmentally all symbols are originally spoken, although literacy and inventiveness later allow for symbolic forms and vehicles in other than the spoken mode. Speech is necessary for the development of intentionality. One cannot intend something if there is only a single possible option. For intent there must be the possibility of a choice to be intended.

It is speech, and its child, the spoken symbol, that enables the human being to decenter, to step away from the instant in time or in space, and thus to name. To name what? To name anything! To name experience, inner emotions, thoughts, objects, *self*, or other. To name things, to name concepts, to name feelings.

Among the innumerable things humans have named, the ancient Greeks labeled two human qualities "arete" and "hamartia." Arete is the name the ancient Greeks gave to an individual's unique excellence, the quality that set an individual apart in an admirable manner. Arete could be applied either to an individual or to a collectivity of individuals such as an organization or a nation. Thus one could speak of an individual's arete (such as Amy's "forthrightness") or of a country's arete (such as the opportunities for free speech and personal liberty in the United States.)

Hamartia is the name the ancient Greeks gave to an individual's tragic flaw, the quality which tended to destroy and bring to naught all of the individual's efforts. As with arete, hamartia can also be applied to either an individual or to a collectivity of individuals. When speaking of hamartia we could speak of Amy's excessive bluntness merging into outright rudeness or of the disregard for the rights of others and the tendency towards licentiousness and irresponsibility often found in citizens of the United States.

These two human traits of arete and hamartia tend to define each other. If one seeks to locate one's hamartia all one usually needs to do is to decide upon what constitutes one's arete and then look for the opposite of that arete. In like manner, if one feels knowledgeable concerning one's hamartia or tragic flaw then often what is needed is to look for the opposite of the hamartia as a means of finding one arete or unique excellence. For Amy, in our example above, forthrightness is a virtue, rudeness and overblown bluntness is a failing. For the United States, liberty is a virtue, licence is a failing or a vice.

Given the whole of humanity it may be suggested that the human arete, our unique excellence is this ability to use spoken symbols to reveal our interiority, to name. Using the rule of contrast or of opposites the human hamartia would be to misname. The

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human hamartia is to misrepresent our interiority. The human hamartia is to mislead others concerning our true self. The human hamartia, the act of misnaming, is to be untruthful, to lie.

There is a Latin saying, "Optimi corruptivi fit pessimi." This translates to "The best, when corrupted, becomes the worst." The spoken word, the instrument of truthfulness and freedom, when corrupted becomes the instrument of inhumanity and of evil. Examples abound of the destructiveness of misnaming, the malignancy of lying. E.g., children lying to parents, faculty lying to each other, administrators lying to their faculty, student plagiarism, faculty plagiarism, false recommendations for students or for colleagues, Mr. Nixon during Watergate, Adolf Eichmann, and that absolute master of the big lie—Adolf Hitler.

Let Hitler represent the nadir of humanity, a model of the iniquity of the human hamartia. Hitler's perverse power nested in his corruption of the spoken word. George Steiner in his novel *The Portage of San Cristobal of A.H.* tells of a small group of militants who have never believed that Hitler died in the Berlin inferno and have finally found the aged A.H. in the middle of a remote and dense South American jungle. They have started to carry him out so that he may be publicly tried for his crimes. Under their code name "Nimrud" they have just informed their radio contact "Ajalon" of their stupendous find. Consider the words (emphasis and editing mine, fexd) of "Ajalon", a man of wisdom, in his reply:

"Ajalon to Nimrud. Message received. Glory to God. Tonight the stars will dance, and the world stand still to draw breath. Because he is ours. *You must not let him speak, his tongue is like no other, it is the tongue of the basilisk, a hundred forked and quick as flame.* All that is God's must have its counterpart, its backside of evil and negation. So it is with the Word, with the gift of speech that is the glory of man and distinguishes him everlastingly from the silence or animal noises of creation. When He made the Word, God made possible also its contrary. There shall come a man whose mouth shall be as a furnace and whose tongue as a sword laying waste. He will know the grammar of hell and teach it to others. He will know the sounds of madness and loathing and make them seem music. Where God said, let there be, he will unsay. And there is one word, which if spoken in hatred, may end creation, as there was one that brought creation into being. Perhaps he knows that word, He who very nearly did us to death. **DO NOT LET HIM SPEAK!**" [Steiner, 1981]

But, you may think, most of us don't tell "BIG LIES." At worst we might, from time to time, tell *little* lies. But the doctrine of hamartia, the perverseness of misnaming, insists that there are no "petty" lies, that there are no "harmless" lies. The reality is that the least lie always injures

the liar if no one else. Here is how Thomas Jefferson considers the lie.

T.J. "He who permits himself to tell a lie once, finds it much easier to do it a second and a third time, till at length it becomes habitual: he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world's believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions." [Byer, 1976]

The thrust of this argument is against all of those who try to convince us that spoken language is amoral. Spoken language is **not** amoral. Spoken language has an immanent morality, an immanent social ethic. Spoken language entails a moral imperative, an ethical imperative to the individual speaker to be **TRUTHFUL**.

To be committed to truthfulness is not the same thing as always knowing what is "true." One may not know, in a given case, what is "true." But one usually knows what one believes to be true in a given case, or at least one is always aware of when his or her utterance fails to conform with what he or she believes. One always knows when one intends to mislead, to be untruthful. However one's subjective truthfulness may or may not be isomorphic with objective truth. To be committed to truthfulness is also not to suggest that one must be committed to unbridled self-disclosure. The commitment to be truthful does not carry with it a commitment to tell everyone everything that might pique their curiosity or assuage their inquisitiveness. Prudence and practicality are always operative and communicative looseness should not be confused with communicative truthfulness.

The force of my argument has been as follows:

1. Speech is the very source of self, both of self-concept and of self-esteem.
2. Spoken language both shapes and reveals self. Spoken language is the echo of our interiority.
3. Spoken language is also the wellspring, the source, of the human capacity for choice and thus for intent. Since all individual morality and all social ethics depend upon the human act, an act of a human self involving intentional choice, then
4. **The spoken word must never be accepted as incidental or peripheral, but demands to be heard and known as central, to the development and expression of all human morality and ethics.**

What this argument entails conceptually is that spoken language is not amoral, that spoken language and truthfulness constitute a moral Moebius strip. Spoken language and truthfulness are part and parcel of one another and of the unified act of human utterance. When the unity of spoken language and truthfulness is intentionally violated the very essence of being human is put at risk.

However a purely conceptual goal for this argument is not enough. We in the speech communication profession need to take action based upon our conceptual conviction.

The responsibility for our profession's future lies with us as individuals. Our professional association mirrors the sum of our individual behaviors. What I hope my argument might entail behaviorally for each of us is that:

- We will better acknowledge our SELF through our speech and our speech through our SELF.

- We will become increasingly truthful with ourselves as to what we know, what we do, and who we really are.

- Our increased knowledge of our true SELF will lead to increased respect for our true SELF.

- We will communicate our TRUE SELF to others while categorically rejecting any suggestion that we may, in any degree, be false.

- We will begin to act, humanly act, individually and professionally—at all levels, in all divisions, through all sections, so as to make our detractors rethink the wisdom and the prudence of their attacks.

- Finally, based upon an understanding flowing from our own subject matter we will make a firm commitment to the pursuit of truthfulness in spoken language.

Individual truthfulness.

Organizational truthfulness.

Civic truthfulness.

Human truthfulness.

Thus raising the level of morality and of ethics,

Throughout the world.

Through speech communication.

As is so often the case what I have said has been phrased more elegantly by one of those true craftsmen of spoken language, a poet. Please hear my argument finally and once again in the words of Shakespeare's character Polonius in *Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. 3.

Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar,
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried;

Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;

But do not dull thy palm with entertainment

Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade.

Beware of entrance to a quarrel,

But being in,

Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.

This above all, to thine own self be true

And it must follow, as the night the day

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

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SCA PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN UNDERGOING TEST

During 1982-83 a public relations campaign in behalf of SCA will be conducted in nine U. S. cities. The objective of the campaign is to persuade parents, political elites and media workers that speech communication instruction is essential at all levels of education. The slogans of the campaign include: "Relating - Communication Is Basic," "Communication and Education - You Don't Have One Without the Other," "Better Living through Better Speaking and Listening," "Speech Communication Association - Teachers and Scholars Who Care."

Nine SCA members located in as many cities are acting as local public relations workers for the association in their cities. Broadcast, print and other materials prepared by the SCA Ad Hoc Committee on Public Relations Policy will be distributed through local media, school and parent organizations. In addition, speakers bureaus will be organized and local news stories generated.

Each local worker received instruction during a special workshop at the SCA annual meetings in Louisville at which presentations were made by Bob Avery (U. of Utah), Jim Fletcher (U. of Georgia), Bob Sadowski (U. of St. Thomas), and Ken Cissna (U. of South Florida). Local workers were also armed with the public relations handbook prepared for the SCA by Bob Avery.

The 1982-83 test market effort will be evaluated at the end of the year to determine whether a larger public relations effort of this sort is warranted in future years.

Local workers in the test market campaign with their cities are Dorothy Higginbotham (Oklahoma City), Roger Mattens

ANNUAL FINANCIAL STATEMENT

Speech Communication Association

Fiscal Year Ending 30 June 1982

	AUDITED STATEMENT 1981-82	BUDGET 1981-82	APPROVED BUDGET 1982-83
INCOME			
Membership dues	\$206,738	\$213,300	\$220,500
Subscriptions	124,993	111,300	126,900
Other publications	41,633	54,000	43,000
Advertising	20,731	16,100	20,500
Placement fees	44,346	37,450	41,900
International debate program	18,600	19,650	10,630
Annual meeting	58,350	56,850	67,115
Summer conference	2,418	1,700	-0-
Investments	15,695	15,000	14,500
Administrative services	19,297	10,500	13,275
Other	4,617	2,250	3,748
Total Income	\$557,418	\$553,600	\$562,068
EXPENSES			
Salaries	\$164,000	\$167,919	\$200,700
Employee benefits	24,298	19,657	31,470
Travel	3,949	5,600	5,600
Publication of journals	80,229	82,750	88,400
Other publications	69,078	78,700	43,400
Office supplies and expense	16,693	21,260	13,000
Postage and shipping	29,820	22,000	18,000
Printing and duplicating	10,310	11,500	12,450
Data processing service	10,397	9,000	4,500
Officers and committees	18,031	24,225	25,778
Dues and subscriptions	2,106	2,500	2,500
Professional services	6,750	6,500	8,000
Depreciation	11,012	-0*	13,000
Interest	16,187	16,100	15,100
National office building	10,558	700	13,730
International debate program	21,747	21,000	13,630
Annual meeting	31,570	25,100	24,900
Summer conference	1,890	1,700	-0-
Special projects			19,510
Member recruit/renewal			25,600
All other	11,501	19,000	16,370
Total Expenses	\$540,126	\$555,211	\$595,640
Excess of income over expenses	17,292	(3,926)	(33,572)

*Omitted: non-cash expense

(Grand Rapids), Rebecca Leonard (Raleigh), Maria Miller (Louisville), Fran Hassencahl (Norfolk/Hampton), Don Cushman (Albany/Troy), Gregg Phifer (Tallahassee), and David Jabusch (Salt Lake City).

Membership in SCA costs less than 10¢ per day, a small price for the benefits—of both the getting *and* giving varieties—received.

Critical Studies, cont. from page 1

All manuscripts should be sent to Robert K. Avery, Editor, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Department of Communication, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112.

Maggi Peirce, 554 Washington St., Fairhaven, MA 02712, will send info about her book *Storyteller's Guide* (or send \$4.50 for a postage-paid copy).