

Elwood Murray's Interdisciplinary View: Expanding the Boundaries
of the Speech Field

Judith Brownell

Binghamton University

Abstract

Elwood Murray believes in the interdisciplinary nature of speech and has been quick to incorporate findings from other disciplines to enhance his understanding of the communication process. This paper traces the development of Professor Murray's view of speech as the field moved from public speaking to the broader, more interdisciplinary concept of communication. The role he played in this transition process is described, and his involvement in the founding of the International Communication Association highlighted.

We owe our communication heritage to a great many pioneers, many of whom we will never know. One such individual, too little recognized by his speech colleagues, is Elwood Murray.[1] Dr. Murray, professor emeritus at the University of Denver, was active in his profession during the period when speech moved from "public speaking" to an interdisciplinary body of information and ideas called "communication." This paper describes Professor Murray's role in this transition—how he viewed the speech field and how his views influenced the development of the National Society for the Study of Communication, known today as the International Communication Association.

Background

Elwood Murray has, from the first, been interdisciplinary in his approach to speech. When others were reluctant to integrate their fields of knowledge and continued to pursue

similar interests along specific academic lines, Murray recognized the significance of contributions from other disciplines in understanding human interaction and incorporated them into his own view of the communication process. He saw speech as the "process of influencing and relating" and believed that a grounding in the principles of effective communication would contribute not only to one's ability to interact with his fellow man, but would also enable the individual to perceive relationships among bodies of knowledge from different disciplines. Increased communication among scholars from diverse fields, Murray believed, would enable insights from these disciplines to be applied more readily toward solving our major social problems.[2]

Dr. Murray graduated in 1931 from the University of Iowa with a Ph.D. in speech and a minor in psychology, having written his dissertation under the direction of Lee Edward Travis.[3] Soon after assuming a teaching position in the Department of Dramatic Arts and Speech at the University of Denver, Murray began to apply his ideas concerning the influence of personality factors on an individual's speech behavior. After several years of development, his ideas concerning the relationship of personality to speech and his unique scheme for characterizing speech-personality types were presented in *The Speech Personality*, one of the first texts to view speech education as mental hygiene.[4] As Murray explained, speech training can serve as personality therapy, for "speech development parallels personality development." The "speech personality" grows out of and is reflected through the individual's speech behavior. Speech training will therefore have a direct influence on personality improvement.[5]

Speech was defined at this time by Murray as a "tool of social adjustment." Consistent with Woolbert's analysis, Murray viewed speech as a "psychological and sociological technique of modifying human behavior by means of body, voice, thought and language." [6] Speech behavior, then, was not only the means

through which personality is expressed; it was also the method by which the individual was able to relate himself to others and to his environment. The ability to make appropriate speech adjustments was essential for the development of human relationships, necessary for social as well as personal integration.[7] In order to make proper adjustments to the speech situation, speaker "integration" was required. The integrated speaker was one who was able to develop warm relationships and who responded appropriately to each speech situation.

As the field of sociology gained status during the 1930s and 1940s, Murray began to emphasize the sociological implications of speech and pointed out that vital role communication played as an agent in relating the individual to his larger social environment. Through what Murray termed "integrative speech," men might be brought together around important issues as they search for "truth" in a world of constant change and uncertainty. At this time two-way, or interpersonal, communication was just beginning to be recognized by speech scholars as a significant unit of analysis. Murray's second textbook, *Integrative Speech*, focused on the individual's ability to work in groups and bring people together around significant issues and ideas. As Murray explained, his text viewed speech "not only as a form of individual expression, but as a powerful instrument for . . . improving the process of human relations and group development." [8]

The interpersonal and small group situation presented a far greater range of problems and variables than former rhetoricians who dealt with speech as public address faced, and they required that new methodologies be developed and applied for improving important communicative behaviors. Murray's concern for the problems of misunderstanding in human communication and his participation in several seminars led by Count Alfred Korzybski[9] prompted him to incorporate principles of general semantics into his thinking about the speech process. Murray came to see the formulations of general semantics as the guidelines to

build more effective communication and thereby promote better human relations. General semantics, along with other methodologies such as group dynamics, sociodrama, and sociometry, were studied for their contribution to understanding and improving the communication process.[10]

Martin Anderson, in his 1954 review of Integrative Speech, found its interdisciplinary approach "commendable" and noted that the authors incorporated theoretical material from the fields of "human relations, group dynamics, semantics, and many of these social sciences." [11] It was the introduction of these "human methodologies which most dearly differentiated Integrative Speech from comparable texts of the period.[12] As Murray summarized in a 1949 article:

If our chief end is so called speech skill, we will confine our understanding and methods accordingly; if our end, in addition to skill, includes personal-social effectiveness, our understanding and methodologies must be vastly expanded.[13]

Expanding the Boundaries of the Discipline

The field of speech, Murray maintained, was concerned with too small a portion of the total communication process. Focusing almost exclusively on the transmission stage, speech scholars had largely neglected what Murray termed the "underlying fundamentals" or the process of symbolization itself. In 1949 he wrote:

. . . perhaps the development of sound programs of the teaching of communication as well as the maintenance of the integrity of our profession requires that we extend the title of our programs from "speech" to "speech and communication," or "communication." [14]

Speech education, Murray had argued for many years, is in need of a new orientation. It is, he continued, "ridiculous that the objectives for this work as originally formulated in 1917 . .

. should not have essentially changed.[15] In the early 1950's, Murray proposed a "core of fundamental communication methodology" which he believed would, among other things, unify the speech area as well as contribute toward the unification of the "entire general education curriculum.[16] Communication, Murray emphasized once again, could not be studied in terms of elements, but must be seen as a multi-level process involving interrelated, mutually influencing components.

In addition to his interest in unifying the field of speech itself, then, Murray had a parallel concern with communication as it functioned to integrate all knowledge. Society's need for individuals with effective communication skill was a recurring theme in his work:

The world leadership which we were so ill prepared to assume is rapidly fading. We seem not able to assess the forces with which we must deal; we have brought our resources and technologies to bear too late and too meagerly, and not always to the right places, and not always the right resources . . .[17]

Better communication on a wide-spread basis would, Murray believed, contribute to society's advance and allow knowledge from various fields to be applied for the common good.

Murray's work during the 1950's was characterized by a search for the major variables of the complex process of communication. This search, begun over a decade earlier, now led him to focus on the concepts of two additional social science approaches—cybernetics, and general systems theory. Finding these viewpoints consistent with his own holistic perspective, Murray drew heavily upon the work of scholars in these new areas and introduced their terminology into much of his own thinking and writing. Referring to the progress being made by these social scientists and the growing applications of their work Murray wrote:

The military, industry, and medicine have for some time been using interdisciplinary teams to solve their problems. Often with great effectiveness they bring to light basic structures to which scholars previously were blinded by the verbal splittings of departmental terminologies.[18]

Well before 1950, then, Professor Murray's thinking and writing had turned to the problem of how bodies of knowledge could be integrated. One event that took place in 1949 might well be seen as the first of several steps toward the solution of this problem. It was a milestone in Dr. Murray's career, and perhaps a turning point in the history of speech as well.

The Society for the Study of Communication

If one man can be called the founder of the International Communication Association, that man is Professor Murray. If it is true that there is nothing quite so powerful as an idea whose time has come, it seems also to be true that someone must seize the hour. Elwood Murray seized the hour and, having seized, stretched it into years of hard and unremitting labor for the cause he loved: communication.[19]

It was at the Speech Association of America's 1949 convention in Chicago that the founders of what was to become the Society for the Study of Communication held their first planning meeting, initiated by a man who saw and understood that the direction of the field did indeed need to be broadened. There was present need for an organization not just for "Academic Teachers of Public Speaking," as might have been appropriate forty years earlier, but for scholars in the behavioral sciences, industry, media, and other areas where knowledge of the process and effects of communication are vital. The Speech Association of America, serving primarily the needs of speech teachers, had not responded to communication as an interdisciplinary field. There were also

more immediate and specific motivations, however, which led to the eventual formation of the National Society for the Study of Communication. The full story of the founding and growth of this organization has been eloquently told in a manuscript by Dr. Carl Weaver.[20] He has done a brilliant job of bringing to life Murray's role in this process.

It is dear that impetus for the initial move to organize came from Dr. Murray. James McBurney, then president of the Speech Association of America, had appointed a committee chaired by Wesley Wiksell whose responsibility it became to represent the interests of speech in matters concerning curriculum in Basic Communication.[21] Hearing that this committee had decided not to cooperate with the National Council of Teachers of English in perspiring a program for Basic Communication, Murray became alarmed. As he explained in an interview with Weaver in 1973:

In the summer of 1949, I heard that a committee which the Speech Association had appointed to study what the relationships of speech should be to basic communication was . . . going to report that speech should not be in basic communication. . . . Now this really activated me into trying to see what we could do, because Basic Communication was burgeoning all over the country. . . . I wrote to James McBurney . . . to inquire whether he would assign a room at the Chicago convention for a group of us to start a new organization to be affiliated with the Speech Association of America. Jim was a little fearful of further splittings of the old speech tree, but graciously agreed to the arrangements desired.[22]

As Weaver later clarified, "the rumor heard by Murray that Wes Wiksell's SAA committee . . . was about to refuse to collaborate with the National Council of Teachers of English was only partly true.[23] In actuality, the committee was simply skeptical of an already dominant "English influence" in the planning of a proposed text for Basic Communication and felt that

the interests of speech might best be served by not going along, but instead "engineering a second publication which would represent the point of view of speech people.[24]

In any event, Murray proceeded with his plans for a meeting in Chicago, describing his idea to McBurney in the following manner:

A group of leading scientist-scholars from fields related to communication are contemplating the formation of a Society for the Study of Communication. This organization would function at the highest level of scholarly standards as well as from the broadest scope of human values which we could attain. The chief aims of the organization would be to bring about the advance of education in communication as related to the improvement of interpersonal relations in every suitable manner through the encouragement of research and suitable publications in this area.[25]

McBurney put Murray in touch with Wiksell, and further agreed to set aside a meeting room at the SAA convention for Murray and the three newly appointed members of his committee; W. Charles Redding, William N. Brigance, and Paul Bagwell.

After months of planning and preparation, Murray's committee met that December and, to their great relief, faced little opposition to their proposal for the new Society. The work Murray had already done in outlining the structure and functions of the organization no doubt facilitated the development of the original constitution by Wiksell and Redding. Immediately, the vital task of organizing study and research committees, which would serve as the basic foundation of the association, was begun.[26] Bagwell became the organization's first president and, to set up and start off the committees, Bagwell turned to the man who was probably the best promoter in the group - Elwood Murray.[27] Weaver, in his history of the Society, explains:

President Bagwell wrote to Murray and asked him to assume the responsibility of organizing and implementing the

various committees. . . . Murray immediately began sending out from Denver what must have seemed to be a snowstorm of letters. . . . Some of the letters asked for names of people to whom he could write. Some he wrote to the people, asking them to serve. Every letter was a personal letter, explaining, asking, hoping. There were hundreds and hundreds of them . . .[28]

Weaver continued:

It had been a long and arduous task, and it was not yet finished. Several more months passed until Murray was able to write to Ralph Nichols, the second president, and ask for a little time to rest.

"I am filled with a deep fatigue," he wrote.[29]

There was no doubt that these committees were to play a vital role in the life of the Society and further distinguish its interests from those of the Speech Association of America. The majority of the committees were chaired by outstanding scholars in the field, and Weaver spoke of their significance to the new association:

All of them were concerned with communication, whose existence the Speech Association admitted only grudgingly. There were no committees concerned with Baconian Rhetoric, the history of the syllogism, or the degree of parallelism in aeries used by Frankenstein. The titles of the committees really characterized the concern of the Society, and the fact that they were called study and research committees relieved every NSSC member of the charge that he was an armchair philosopher. . . . It is possible that the Society would have died in infancy hut for this attraction. But it is also likely that the real contribution of the committees to research lay in the questions they raised, not in the research they did.[30]

It was also Murray who gave the original name to the association, having referred to "The Society for the Study of Communication" in his pre-convention correspondence. As Weaver noted with a bit of humor:

It is possible that—since it really does matter what you call it—the name of the Society helped to inspire the sometimes fierce loyalty to the research and study committees. After all, the National Society for the Study of Communication must do some studying, and the research and study committees were there to do it.[31]

Throughout the years, however, proposals arose more and more frequently concerning the possibility of a name change. The problem?

Almost from the first . . . there were those who did not like the name. It was long, taking from five to ten seconds to pronounce. It had in it one of the hardest consonants to pronounce, especially if the talker had dentures. It lacked euphony—it did not roll easily off the tongue . . .[32]

And so, eventually, after more than twenty years of stumbling, the name was shortened to the International Communication Association. It remains thus today.

With two journals and a healthy membership, Elwood Murray's dream of an interdisciplinary association which would advance the study of communication, in all its multi-relationships, was being fulfilled. As Murray moved to become the association's third president a quarter of a century ago, he wrote:

The needs of the times are such that only something equivalent to that research to which the atom yielded will be adequate. To do this our programs must be interdepartmental and inter-disciplinary. Our laboratory must be in the everyday operations of industry, the schoolroom, the government, the community.[33]

Those who became leaders in the years to follow held similar hopes and were inspired by the same encompassing goals.

Frank E. X. Dance, who has differed with Murray on other accounts, had this to say:

An effort was made . . . I hope by me and by all those who followed, to make the association increasingly interdisciplinary multi-disciplinary, to get people who cared about communication whether they identified themselves with the field of communication or not; physiologists, psychologists, mathematicians, statisticians, as well as the old guard . . .[34]

Conclusion

It was Murray's firm conviction in the interdisciplinary nature of speech, and his belief that its boundaries should be expanded, that led him to take an active role in founding the National Society for the Study of Communication. Based on the premise that speech must be broadly defined, the society fostered increased communication among those in speech and related fields. Murray discussed the need this organization was conceived to fill:

Only on the fringes were we seriously and deeply studying and teaching our function. We had no unifying basis whereby public address, discussion, oral reading, theatre, radio and speech correction could be put together to contribute toward interhuman understanding and teamwork. . . . The NSSC was organized to provide this unifying basis. . . . This organization is structured not only to give deeper level "speech" approaches their natural place as the integrating core in the curriculum, but also to encourage disciplines in improving communication at all levels of intra and inter group functioning.[35]

In a recent conversation, Murray expressed the belief that, although its scope has broadened over the years, the association has remained, on the whole, true to its original goals.[36]

Murray had a vision, from his earliest days at the University of Denver, of unifying the speech arts and sciences

into a coherent discipline which would achieve the highest possible academic recognition. The means through which this integration could be accomplished gradually came to be seen as the symbolizing process, fundamental to all communicative behavior. Speech, as man's uniquely human ability, was what made all knowledge possible. Focus on the communication process would serve to unify not only the field of speech but every discipline, for communication was the root and essence of knowledge in all fields. To this end Murray worked to encourage others to think and perceive relationally, to integrate what they learned, to view themselves and their language behavior with increased objectivity so that healthy and productive outcomes would result. With increased communication between academic specialties, Murray believed, many of our most pressing social problems could be solved.

Notes

- [1] See James H. Platt, "Elwood Murray," Western Speech XXV(Spring, 1961), 118-120; Johnnye Akin et al. (ed.), Language Behavior: A Book Readings in Communication, anthology dedicated to Elwood Murray on the occasion of his retirement (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1970); Boyd Adams, "Elwood Murray—A Pioneer in Speech Communication" (unpublished master's thesis. Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts, Brigham Young University, 1971); Judith Brownell, "Elwood Murray: A Case Study in Educational Integration and Innovation" (unpublished dissertation, Humanities, Syracuse University, 1978).
- [2] See Judith Brownell, "Elwood Murray's Interdisciplinary Analogue Laboratory," Communication Education (January, 1979), 9-21; Elwood Murray and James Perdue, "General Semantics in an Interdisciplinary Educational Program: Plan for a Laboratory in the Integration of Knowledge," Etc., (1956), 38-46; Elwood Murray, "Communicating and Relating. Undoing the Fragmentations," Etc., (1976), 423-443.
- [3] Published in 1932 and entitled "The Dysintegration of Breathing and Eye Movements in Stutterers During Silent Reading and Reasoning," Murray's was one of the first experimental studies in speech. It was completed in time to be footnoted in a chapter on the "Nature of Stuttering" in Travis's text. Speech Pathology (1931).
- [4] Elwood Murray, The Speech Personality (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1937). The text was used in Denver's Basic Communication course during the late 1930's and early 1940's, and underwent twelve printings. There was also an accompanying inventory, the Murray-Miller Personal-Social Adjustment Test.
- [5] Murray, Speech Personality, p. 9
- [6] Murray, Speech Personality, p. 10
- [7] Murray, Speech Personality, p. 18

- [8] Elwood Murray, Raymond H. Barnard and J. V. Garland, Integrative Speech (New York: John S. Swift, 1953). See also Elwood Murray, "Studies in Personal and Social Integration," Speech Monographs, 11 (1944), 9-27.
- [9] After 1940, general semantics became an increasingly important methodology and influence on Murray's teaching and writing. In 1942 The Speech Personality underwent revision to incorporate additional material on general semantics. Murray invited Alfred Korzybski to the University of Denver on several occasions to participate in summer seminars, and as a guest at the second (1941) and third (1949) Congresses on general semantics held at the Denver Hilton Hotel.
- [10] Elwood Murray, "Communication and Interpersonal Relations: Sociodrama and Psychodrama in the College Basic Communication Class," Sociatry (1948), 134-145 & 322-333.
- [11] Martin Anderson, review of Integrative Speech, Western Speech (1954), 53. Murray noted that both The Speech Personality and Integrative Speech have been given credit by some scholars for contributing to the eventual change in the name of the national association from Speech Association of America to the Speech Communication Association, and commented that "the volumes aroused controversy no less than they were ignored by the more conservative of the speech establishment" (letter from Elwood Murray to Judi Brownell, January 15, 1976).
- [12] Although Integrative Speech followed to a large extent the standard form and content of other discussion texts, the "communication methodology setting" into which speech was placed distinguished it from volumes by such authors as James McBurney, Kenneth Hance, A. Craig Baird, Norwood Brigance, and others.
- [13] Elwood Murray, "Speech in the Total School Curriculum," Southern Speech Journal (1949), 234.
- [14] Murray, "School Curriculum," p. 239.

- [15] Elwood Murray, "Communication and the Grand Analogue."
Paper presented at the Western Speech Association
Convention, Boulder, Colorado, 1965.
- [16] Elwood Murray, "The Communication Approach to Speech."
Paper presented before the opening general session of the
Speech Association of America Convention, 1952.
- [17] Elwood Murray, "Corridors Among the Ivory Towers: A
Relational-Communication Approach to Unification of the
College Curriculum," Western Business Review (1961), 44-60.
(First delivered to the Denver student body upon receipt of
the Sixth Annual Faculty Lecturer Award, University of
Denver, April, 1960).
- [18] Elwood Murray and James Perdue, "The Analogue Approach
to the Integration of Knowledge." Paper presented to a
joint session of the National Society for the Study of
Communication and the Speech Association of America,
Chicago, 1956.
- [19] Carl Weaver, "History of the International
Communication Association," unpublished manuscript
commissioned by the International Communication
Association, 1974, p. iv.
- [20] Weaver's document is a moving and detailed story of
the struggles and triumphs of a group of individuals who
fought to keep their association active and healthy. My
account is based on his extensive volume, and I am very
much indebted to his generosity in allowing me to borrow
from his work.
- [21] In a 1948 article, Murray presented what he believed
to be the basic assumptions of Denver's basic
communications offering (the required text for all sections
of this course was The Speech Personality). He concluded,
"human relations thus becomes the core of the Basic
Communication course with general semantics as the
principle method for training in appropriate evaluation
reactions." The Basic Communication movement had

significant impact on speech education throughout the country, and was a particularly dominant influence at the University of Denver during the 1950's under the direction of Keith Case.

- [22] Weaver, "History," p. ix.
- [23] Weaver, "History," p. 1.
- [24] Weaver, "History."
- [25] Weaver, "History," pp. 13-14.
- [26] The preliminary proposal regarding the structure and organization of the Society, as presented by Murray to the committee, is included in the Weaver manuscript, PP. 51-61.
- [27] Weaver, "History," p. 84.
- [28] Weaver, "History."
- [29] Weaver, "History," p. 110.
- [30] Weaver, "History," p. 129.
- [31] Weaver, "History," p. 66, 391.
- [32] Weaver, "History," p. 391.
- [33] Elwood Murray, 'A Progress Report: The President's Letter," Journal of Communication 3 (1953), 3.
- [34] Weaver, "History," p.373.
- [35] Elwood Murray, "The Gilman Plan for the Reorganization of the Speech Association of America: A Symposium," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 38 (1952),334.
- [36] Recorded telephone conversation with Elwood Murray, March 6, 1982.