

NOISE IN NEGOTIATION – TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY

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Abstract. *Negotiations are polyvalent processes, in which communication plays a nodal role. Out of the main communication components (participants, message, transmission channel, coding, decoding, feed-back, etc.), one has been almost neglected, although its impact is significant, and that is noise. Attempting to fill in this blank, in order to outline negative influences and to examine possibilities of avoiding them, my approach here refers to classifying noise. Noise can be natural, or artificial, intentional or non-intentional, intrinsic or extrinsic to the negotiation environment. In addition, I complement the most commonly held perception of noise, that of an auditory disturbance, with other categories of noises, visual, olfactory, cognitive, psychical.*

Keywords: negotiation, communication, noise vs. barrier, noise typology.

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1. Introduction

Negotiation is, by definition, the process along which the participants try to reach commonly acceptable conditions (Dupont, 1994). In a more explicit form, in my opinion, negotiation includes all the actions undertaken and all the documents prepared and presented during a dialogue between at least two partners assumed equal, taking place either directly or through representatives, which may lead or not to the conclusion of a contract, of a transaction, or of a business. Outlining the importance of the continuing dialogue between the partners, Ioan Deac (2002) considers that „negotiation is that form of communication implying a communicative and dynamic process of adjusting purposes for setting a common ground, through which more parties with different interests and holding specific objectives mediate their positions in order to reach a mutually profitable understanding”.

All these definitions, regardless of their debatable content, of further completions or explanations that one author or another may add, outline the crucial role of conversation, dialogue, discussion, exchange of ideas during a negotiation. No matter how we name this interference between the partners, it can be well described by using communicational parameters. Thus, employing the *sine qua non* elements of communication, the two participants, and the message to be transmitted/received, the simplest schema takes the following aspect:



Source: Schramm, 1955, p. 3.

Figure 1. Simplified schema of the communicational process

A more complex schema can be drafted starting from the famous quintet launched in 1948 by Harold Dwight Lasswell, when asking the five essential questions, „*who says what, by what means, to whom and with what effect?*”, which were taken over from Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, who advised the ones willing to learn rhetoric to ask them. A possible schema starting from these questions is presented in Figure 2:

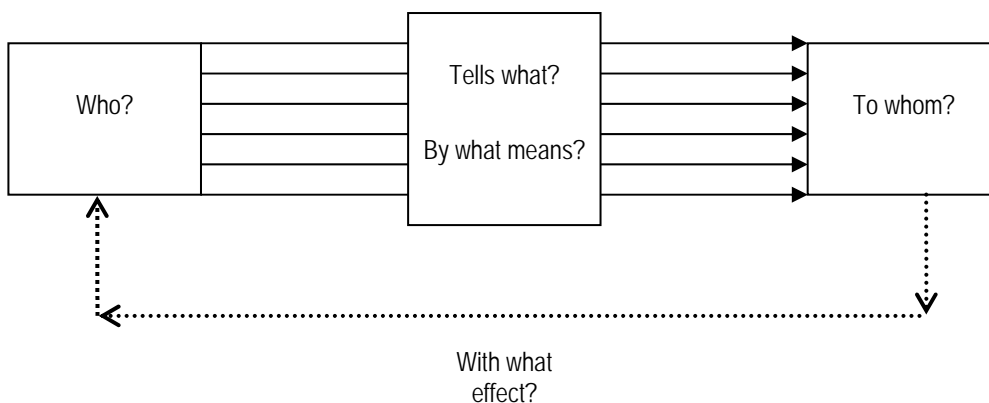


Figure 2. The communicational schema according to Lasswell

The „effect” Lasswell points at is far from what we call „feedback”. It represents the influence the message has on the receiver. Of course, it can take the form of a verbal or gestural answer, like in the above schema. The model, actually, was criticized precisely for being unidirectional.

The first who, when discussing about the communicational elements, take into account, besides participants (emitter and receiver), message, channel, a perturbation, the noise, are Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1975). Their research was based on the analysis of the message transmitted by electromagnetic waves (on the phone). In this process, there are two new phenomena involved, namely the coding of the message when transmitted, and its decoding when received. It may happen that, during the transmission period, several noises or interruptions interfere, which do not block the message, but distort its meaning. Dorin Popa (2005, p. 68) considers that „*the*

basic principle of this model is represented by entropy, the degree to which the information in the message is ordered or disordered.”

A schematic representation of the entire process could look like this:

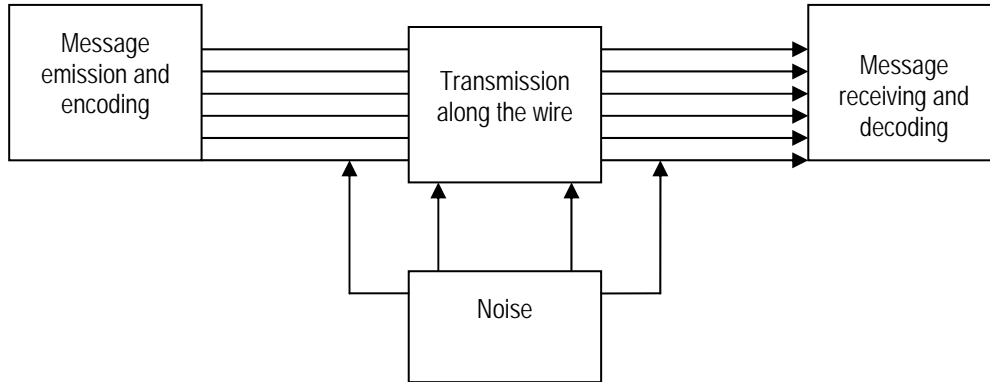


Figure 3. The communicational schema according to Shannon-Weaver’s model

Although the model proposed by Shannon and Weaver adds new elements, like coding, decoding and noise, it is still linear, unidirectional and, thus, devoid of feed-back and lacking the certainty assured by eliminating the unknown elements interfering with information diffusion.

Further on, the modeling of the communicational process will diversity and deepen, taking into account not only more than one emitter and more than one receiver, the switching roles phenomenon, by feedback and the multidirectional character of actual communication, but also the interference of “controllers” and “regulators” in the process of communication, as well as the transmission of information in a two-step, flux-like manner.

As my purpose here is to classify noise, I will leave, for the time being, the analysis of the communicational models evolution to the moment when it was included in the schema of communication.

2. Noise vs. barriers

Noise, according to the aforementioned Shannon and Weaver, *represents any received signal which is not intended by the emitter, or any element which impedes on the accuracy of the message received, or on the easiness of its decoding.* Based on this definition, the two mathematicians distinguish between two categories of noise, namely the *technical noise*, due to physical perturbations (cracks on the wire), and the *semantic noise*, signifying any distortion in the meaning of the message, which is unintended by the emitter and which affects the correct decoding of the message by the receiver.

In a larger sense, *the noise* signifies the phenomenon which leads to a partial and transitory perturbation of the message, out of physical, material, psychological causes. Thus, the information transmitted to the receiver is inaccurate, or modified. As a consequence, the receiver feels the need to interpret the information received and to check for its conformity with the initial signification.

On the contrary, *the barrier* represents a complete breaking of the communicational process, out of various causes (physical, material, psychological). The factors which favor the barriers in communication and, implicitly, in negotiation, can be exterior, independent from the participants (environmental factors), or interior, dependent on individual psychical processes, personality, behavioral elements.

Although I do not consider these two definitions to be comprehensive enough related to their roles in the negotiation, given that my purpose here is to distinguish between the two, and not to define them, I will conclude by saying that, while barriers block communication, noise only distorts the message, for a limited period of time, until when, due to checking, the right meaning is restored.

In order to benefit, in a future study, from a solid ground based on which to analyze the effects noise has in negotiation and to find solutions of avoiding them, I distinguish, for the time being, between various categories of noise.

3. Noise typology

The definition tells that the noise is a perturbation, having various natures and sources. Thus, a classification should take into account all these factors.

1. The first dichotomy takes into account the *source of noise*. Thus, I distinguish:

a. *Natural noise*, caused by natural phenomena. Here, I include the noise of the rain drops on the window or sash, the rainbow rising after rain, an abundant snowfall starting, a gust of wind bringing inside the smell of the spring flowers, etc. These examples point to the fact that noise, as an element of the communication process, is not exclusively noise as such, that is, an auditory perturbation, but any kind of stimulus (visual, olfactory, psychological), which triggers effects unintended by the emitter, because the receiver pays attention to something else in nature.

b. *Artificial noise*, which is due to artifacts created by humans. Here, I mention the noise in the street (horns, sirens, shouts), a mobile phone ringing, the noise of the clutch pencil pushed and released by one of the participants, the signal that the printer is out of toner/ paper, the eccentric clothes of one of the participants, a strong perfume (even when delightful), etc.

As the main factors in a negotiation are the participants who are willingly attending the negotiation, another factor would be volition.

2. Taking into account *volition*, I distinguish between an unintended and an intended noise.

a. Under *unintended noise*, I distinguish at least two categories:

– *Unintended noise exterior to the system*. Here, I include all the factors enumerated under natural noise. Unintended noise can be auditory, visual, or

olfactory. Thus, one can't accuse the participants of wicked intentions if a siren is heard in the street, because the ambulance or the firefighters are passing by, or if the drivers in the traffic toot noisily their horns, or if strikers shout slogans at the very climax of the negotiation. Even less can a heavy rain, with thunders, be blamed on someone? Some olfactory noises may interfere, either pleasant (the smell of the spring flowers), or unpleasant, more often: smell of gas, smell of food, smell of something burnt. The visual aspect of noise shouldn't be ignored: a sudden clouding or very shining rays coming through the window.

For sure, some of these elements of noise can be avoided or reduced by choosing for the negotiation a location which is less exposed to exterior stimuli.

– *Unintended noise interior to the system.* In this category I include some of the factors named under artificial noise. For instance, the sudden ringing of a mobile can't be considered intended. Also, the fact that someone not involved in the negotiation opens the door is a mistake, but not an intended noise, as it is hard to believe that one of the participants could have anticipated the rhythm of the negotiation and arrange for this perturbation in a certain moment.

The visual unintended noise can appear at the level of the participants, but also at the level of the written message. At the level of the participants, if a very good specialist had suffered a paresis, or another accident, this sudden discovery, for someone who has met him before, may constitute a noise that will somehow corrupt the entire negotiation. Also, if one of the participants has a tic of mimic, it may be difficult for the others to concentrate and look him in the face. At the level of the written message, this type of noise appears if some of the distributed documents were poorly printed, and there is no time for getting a better quality.

b. *Intended noise interior to the system.* In my opinion, this type of noise can only be interior to the system, as it is hard to believe and to prove that someone or something exterior to the system may intentionally do something for the failure of the negotiation. Also, I have to point out that intentional noise is the most diverse, the most complex, and the most subtle, being frequently used as a negotiation technique or as a manipulation technique, as it can prove to be a valuable weapon for the party using it. Here I include:

– *Auditory noise.* It is a well known fact that playing with your clutch pencil is annoying for the one listening to you, drawing his attention to this nervous movement. Thus, something crucial in the negotiation may be neglected by the listener, which suits the will of the emitter. Some say that this playing with the pencil is a gesture of anxiety, nervousness, which may be labeled as unintended. But, knowing that participants in a negotiation are, usually, not beginners, this hypothesis is hard to support. The same is valid for the listener. He may, as well, use phonic noise in order to interrupt the logic of the speaker's thoughts. For instance, a fake coughing access may serve well this purpose.

– *Visual noise.* This type of noise can appear at both the level of the participants and of the negotiation environment. I exclude, as mentioned before, the tics, and refer to those changes of mimics due to information received during the negotiation. Thus, if when hearing a certain price for a transaction, a partner may

either gesticulate (raise an eyebrow, draw back lips in a rictus, clasp hands) or stand still, which may give the signal that the message was not understood, leading to a repetition, or that the partner protests, leading to a lowering of price. In fact, it was a way to distort the received information.

A clearer form of noise refers to the way the space is decorated. For instance, placing on the table a tall vase with flowers, blocking the reciprocal regards, or inviting the guest to take a seat where the sun reflects most are not only ways of intimation, of inducing discomfort, but also premises for discontinuities in communication and for distorting the message. No one can easily be eloquent while trying to avoid the too shiny light coming into his eyes, or while striving to look his locators in the face.

– *The olfactory intentional noise* is more rarely met, because a strong smell, no matter how pleasant, otherwise, disturbs equally all the participants. Still, I might signal the smell of the scented sticks used by the Asians to perfume the room. They are not disturbed, and even think it polite to burn this kind of sticks before a meeting, but may also know that a European, for instance, will not be accustomed with these smells, and we may consider that hospitality is, in this case, a form of noise.

– *Cognitive noise*. To one of the forms of cognitive noise, the semantic one pointed Shannon and Weaver. They took into account only the unintended aspect of distorting the meaning when receiving a message. Further research proved that partners master specialized languages in variable proportions. If one of the partner uses words unknown to the other, this will lead to a distortion of the message, and to its incomplete and incorrect decoding.

Another way in which cognitive noise may express is the level of general culture. The locator whose general background is richer, may use quotes from Latin, references to mythology, proverbs, etc., which are not directly connected with the topic of the negotiation, but which intimidate the listener, preventing him from accurately getting and interpreting the important message in the discourse.

In international negotiations, language itself is a factor of noise. Usually, one of the parties includes native speakers, and the other people having learned, more or less proficiently, the respective language. If the native uses the standard language, and the other is a proficient speaker, the noise is kept at a minimum. But if the native uses argotic elements, jargon, archaisms, regionalisms, and the interlocutor is not very good in that language, the significance of the message may be entirely lost. In this case, not even using a translator helps, except for the case when he is a perfect bilingual. Anyway, the interference of a third person may, in itself, lead to the distortion, if not to the complete transformation of the initial meaning of information.

– *Behavioral noise*. This appears, more likely, in international negotiations, whenever one of the parties holds only vague notions of the other's specificity, or is completely naïve. For instance, it is well known that oriental people bend at the first meeting, instead of shaking hands. Not knowing, or neglecting this aspect may create a state of discomfort. Also, an Asian person holding out his hand will puzzle a Western partner waiting for a bow.

Without aiming at having presented exhaustively the categories of noise that a negotiator may come across, I will conclude with a comprehensive schema of the discussed aspects.

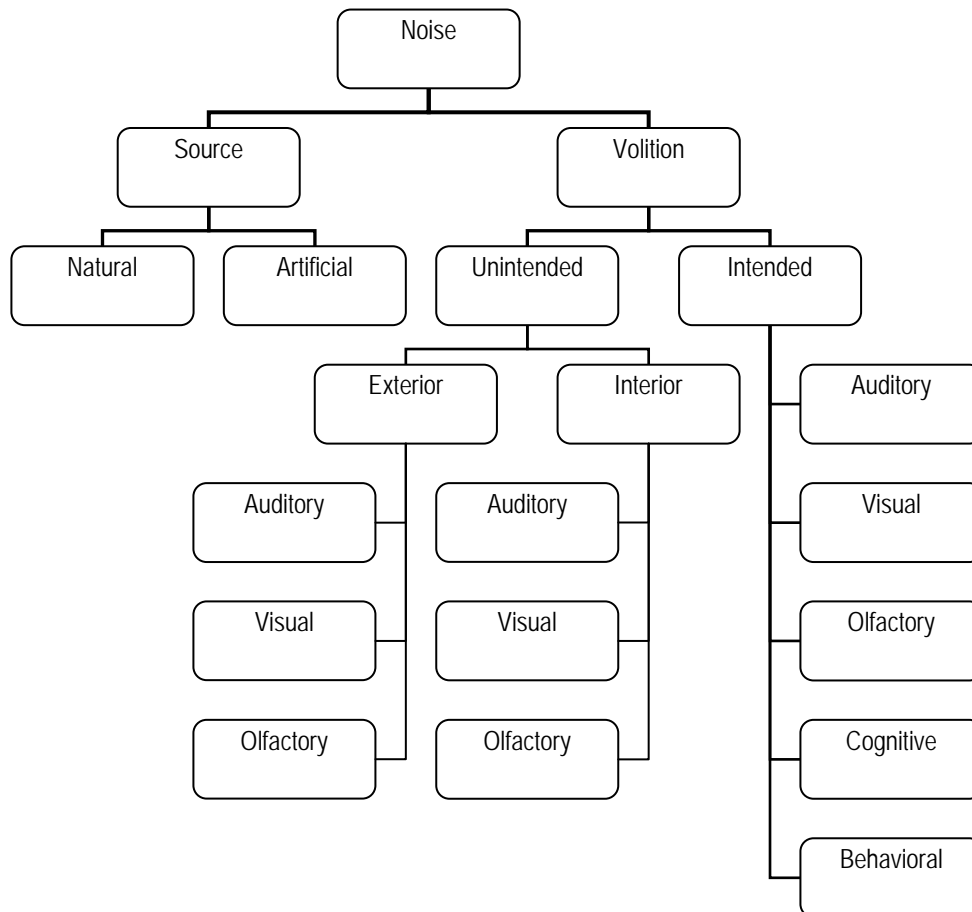


Figure 4. Categories of noise

4. Conclusions

The analysis I performed on various categories of noise and the resulting classification are not exhaustive. Many of the classes and categories of noise in proposed will raise disputes and comments. I underline, nevertheless, that, in my opinion, the noise is not only a physical noise, that it doesn't appear exclusively on the transmission channel, that it may unintended, but as well intended, during a negotiation.

The effects of noise and the possibilities to overcome or to reduce them are a subject for further research.

Notes

- (1) In psychology, psychoanalysis, literature, it is well known and used the interior dialogue, with only one participant. We can admit, in some circumstances, even negotiations with self. But, in this stage of the research, I will not refer to that.
- (2) A linear schema may be found in *Modele ale comunicării*, (http://facultate.regielive.ro/seminarii/comunicare/modele_ale_comunicarii-7775.html), and another one, much more complex, in Harold Dwight Lasswell – *Le monde de Nalya*, (<http://nalya.canalblog.com/archives/2008/01/06/7463287.html>)
- (3) Cf. Felea, M. (2003) Bariere în comunicarea dintre întreprinderile comerciale și publicul lor, in Patriche, D. (ed.), *Comerț și globalizare*, București: ASE, pp. 101-108, which considers that not Shannon and Weaver are the first to talk about noise, but Philip Kotler in *Managementul Marketingului* (1998)
- (4) Cf. Mihaela Cotoră, **Păstrarea controlului și autorității. în ședința de judecată. (Abordare psihosocială)** (www.inm-lex.ro/fisiere/pag_35/det_125/381.doc)
- (5) Cf. Cardon, A. (2002), *Jocurile manipulării*, where, even if noise in communication is not explicitly referred to, the author raises the problem of correct decoding, if we may say so, of the distorted message.

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