
Kluwer Mediation Blog

We're all erisologists and humanomicists now!

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Tuesday, June 8th, 2021

Erisology has been [defined](#) as the study of disagreement – where people are no closer to understanding each other at the end of an exchange than they were at the beginning. Sound familiar? Eris was the Greek goddess of discord. The term was coined by John Nerst, a blogger in Sweden, who is interested in the declining health of public discourse.

A recent [article](#) in the Economist reflecting on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, to mark the hundredth anniversary of his book 'Tractatus', stimulated more thought about words and their contribution to erisology. In Tractatus Wittgenstein asked, what is language? His answer was, to quote the article: "the picture theory of language" where "all meaningful thoughts that people have are arrangements of pictures, which when expressed in language as 'propositions', can be communicated to others." According to Wittgenstein "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world".

This in turn begs a whole list of questions for me about language and how it is used: What do we hear? How do we hear? What pictures do we see when we hear a word or phrase? What do we feel when we hear a word or phrase? How do these differ from what others see or feel? What are the differences between hearing and seeing a word or phrase? How important is the way in which we receive it or who we receive it from? In what context are we placing what we hear and how does this context differ from that of the person we are communicating with?

This takes us into the world of cognitive biases such as reactive devaluation, attribution error, confirmation bias and highlights the importance of how propositions are framed and by whom.

What seems to be apparent is the words themselves, important though they are, are not enough. It's long been recognised that tone and visual signals from body language are an important component of communication, particularly if there is an incongruity between what is being said how it is being said, but is there more?

As an aside what have we learned from living a life on Zoom about how messages are transmitted, received, translated and interpreted?

As mediators we have a vital role to play in helping people describe and interpret the pictures they are seeing, both of their own positions and their relation to their underlying interests and those of those they are negotiating with. We also have to try and help them see and understand the pictures that others are seeing as well.

Another interesting aspect to this is the degree to which people communicate with jargon and other codes, which have special meaning and aid communication between those in the know, but can exclude and confuse ‘outsiders’.

We may also be ‘divided by a common language’ more often than we imagine. The same expressions can mean different things to groups from different backgrounds, something that struck me quite forcibly in the early days of trying to build stronger relationships between academia and business. This can lead to growing mistrust when a party from one background undertakes to do something for someone from another, who takes a different meaning about what has been promised.

Interpreters and code breakers might be needed – is that part of what we mediators are actually offering to be?

Digging deeper into the images (pictures, maps, charts, symbols, numbers etc.) that are generated by words and the feelings and thoughts they inspire and really understanding their context, would seem to be fertile territory for improving communication and generating real understanding of oneself and others. It might also provide a useful frame for discussions aimed at generating deeper understanding of positions, interests and needs. This deeper understanding will then provide a stronger foundation for helping develop and explore a wider range of options for moving forward which allow interests and needs to be met.

Generating deeper understanding links to another new discipline I recently came across: Humanomics. This approach, described by Diedre Nansen McCloskey in a recent [book](#), attempts to position economics at the interface between the natural sciences and humanities in terms of understanding human progress. In a [review](#) of the book in the Financial Times Felix Martin describes the starting point of this way of studying things:

“Human beings are conscious agents, whose behaviour is governed by ethical conventions, and who spend much of their waking hours attempting to persuade one another using written and spoken rhetoric. It is these uniquely human qualities that make studying human society different from studying plants, animals or physical particles, because to understand it one has to find out what the conventions and ideas that motivate people are, and where they come from. Unlike in the natural sciences, just observing behaviour from the outside cannot really explain what’s going on. To get people, one has to get inside their heads.”

So as well as mediators perhaps we should also describe ourselves as erisologists and humanomicists!


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