



# Charles E. Osgood's continuing contributions to intercultural communication and far beyond!☆

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## ABSTRACT

In memory of Charles E. Osgood's continuing contributions to and pervasive influences in intercultural research and communication – both in contextual theories and application methodologies, this article will summarize his life-long efforts in six ways: First, the development of theoretical foundations in human behavioral and communication processes; Second, the development of semantic technique and its applications; Third, the massive cross-cultural measurements of affective meanings of human conceptions; Fourth, the psycholinguistics research in human verbal behaviors; Fifth, his efforts in inter-ethnic and inter-national conflict resolutions and peace; Sixth, his impact on the theories and methodologies in inter-cultural awareness and trainings. Finally, his continuing contributions far beyond the above six areas are documented in terms of the authors' own long-time endeavors in scientific research in intra- and inter-cultural communications theories, analytic methodologies, and contemporary substantive social issues, ranging from conflicts, adult intimate relationships, to youth communications and developments. It can be ascertained that Osgood's contributions will continue in both social contexts and academic disciplines as evidenced by his life-long personal contacts in communications with international colleagues and his administrative leadership of the world renowned, interdisciplines-based Institute of Communications Research for over two decades at the University of Illinois.

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## 1. Introduction

Charles Osgood (Charlie to most everybody who knew him) was an excellent educator, theorist, researcher, administrator, communicator, and perhaps more importantly, a decent human being who worried about and devoted a good part of his intellectual life to the pursuit of world peace and human dignities. Because of his multi-dimensional roles and multi-faceted intellectual endeavors (see the [Appendix](#) for a chronology of his positions and awards), he accomplished in many areas what might require many scholars to devote their entire lifetime – even in the contemporary academic environments equipped with advanced technologies for speedy productivities.

To facilitate the understanding of Osgood's contributions and the foreseeable applications for contemporary causes, his achievements and impacts are described in the six areas: First, theoretical foundations in human behavioral and

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communication processes; Second, semantic technique and applications; Third, cross-cultural measurements of affective meanings; Fourth, the psycholinguistics research in human verbal behaviors; Fifth, inter-ethnic and inter-national conflict resolutions and peace; and Sixth, contributions in intercultural trainings.

Further, to project Osgood's continuing contributions far beyond the above six areas, the authors document their own long-time endeavors by following Osgood's foot-steps in scientific research and editorial analyses of intra- and inter-cultural communication theories, analytic methodologies and contemporary substantive social issues, ranging from conflicts, adult intimate relationships, to youth communications and developments.

Finally, Osgood's contributions are further envisioned from a brief summary of his life-long personal contacts and archival communications with colleagues – in and outside of the United States, regarding the above six areas of contributions.

## 2. Osgood's mediation theory as foundations in human behavioral and communication processes

Osgood's intellectual leading authority in psychological theories and principles was firmly established via his publication of *Method and Theory in Experimental Psychology* (Osgood, 1953) – the famous “Blue Book.” In that book, he reviewed and integrated the most prominent theories and techniques across all areas of experimental psychology, in particular, human learnings and social behaviors. A major contribution was the development of mediation theory in terms of the “hierarchical structure of associations” (Osgood, 1952, 1953). This development, in which “meaning” was seen as the result of conditioning of anticipatory emotional and non-verbal responses to signs (e.g., words and images), well outlined in the *Method* book, overcame the major problem of single-stage verbal behaviorism advocated by Skinner (Chomsky, 1959; Osgood, 1958; Knapp, 1986; Skinner, 1937, 1938, 1947a, 1947b, 1957, 1983). Osgood's mediational behaviorism, addressing the implicit, nonverbal processes in behavior, has significant impacts on social perceptions, attitudes, stereotypes, and intercultural interactions (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). In the science of intercultural communication, Osgood's mediational theory has long become a must-read foundation in standard graduate training curricula even in the 21st century (Burriss, 2007).

In the *Method* book, (cf. pp. 713–714), based on earlier work (particularly that done with Ross Stagner on the measurement of social stereotypes: Stagner & Osgood, 1946), he came up with three working assumptions about what semantic meaning was all about:

- (1) The process of description or judgment can be conceived as the allocation of a concept to an experiential continuum defined by a set of polar terms.
- (2) Many different experiential continua, or ways in which meanings vary, are essentially equivalent and hence may be represented by a single dimension.
- (3) A limited number of such continua can be used to define a semantic space within which the meaning of any concept can be specified. (Osgood, 1953, p. 713).

Considering that semantic meaning had bedeviled philosophers, and, more than one psychologist over the years, Osgood's assumptions were breathtaking in their simplicity. Here was not only a definition of meaning but also the hints of a way of measurement, which were more fully laid out in a seminal early article (Osgood, 1952).

Underlying this simplicity was a theory about how signs (i.e., words) would come to have a certain place in the space defined by the “limited number of ... continua...” First of all, we must note that Osgood was steeped in the stimulus/organism/response Hullian framework. That framework allowed for intervening activities (most often internal) to occur between stimulus and response. That is, these “fractional anticipatory responses” were mediational and linked up the stimuli and responses. Meaning, then, could be understood as these “little r-sub m's.” These responses, Osgood noted, were a “partial identity of the disposition itself with the behavior elicited by the object” (Osgood, 1953, p. 695). He noted that, “This is the crucial identification, the mechanism that ties signs (e.g., words) to particular stimulus objects and not to others.” We refer the reader to Fig. 215 in the 1953 book, which is reproduced as Fig. 1 (p. 7) in Osgood, Suci, and Tannebaum (1957). In the 1953 book, Osgood used an example from his own childhood to illustrate the development of a connotative sign – the development of strong negative autonomic reactions to the word SPIDER (p. 696).

In any case, these “fractional anticipatory reactions” called representational mediations are, in the case of connotative meaning, heavily emotional in content. Reaching back to the earlier study of Schlosberg (1952) in which two basic dimensions of facial expressions were found (Pleasant–unpleasant and attention–rejection), Osgood reasoned that the emotions (which are part of the meaning of a term) would also be describable by a similarly small set of bi-polar scales (an idea that had been around for some time). Indeed, Osgood had used this format in the 1946 investigation with Stagner of political attitudes.

In fact, much of contemporary behavioral science including, for example, industrial psychology emphasizes implicit attributional determinants that find their roots in mediational associations and processes. Even after the emergence of cognitive psychology (Knapp, 1986), mediational representations of human cognitive processes still play the major roles in the integration of the psychosemantic model of human social behaviors (Landis, 2005; Tzeng, 1993, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

## 3. Osgood's semantic differential technique and its pervasive applications

Osgood needed one more piece before he could move to a method for measuring these mediational processes. That piece came in the realization that in English and in most other languages, adjective modifiers are used to ascribe deeper meaning to nouns and that those modifiers are often emotional in content. In formal terms, the description of the process became:

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