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Robert T. Oliver: Trailblazer in Intercultural Communication

Robert Shuter

Marquette University, robert.shuter@marquette.edu

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Marquette University

Abstract: Robert T. Oliver was a scholar extraordinaire and a towering figure in rhetoric and public address, but his contributions to the field of intercultural communication are less well known. For over sixty years, Dr. Oliver wrote prolifically about the impact of culture on rhetoric and communication. Although Dr. Oliver rarely used the words intercultural communication in his writings, which were voluminous, he contributed greatly to the development of the field. This essay focuses on Dr. Oliver's four major contributions to intercultural communication: (1) Critiquing the Eurocentric bias of rhetoric/communication, (2) offering an Asiatic alternative to the study of rhetoric/communication, (3) utilizing an intracultural perspective to frame rhetoric/communication research, and (4) envisioning international diplomacy as a site for examining rhetoric/communication. [China Media Research. 2011; 7(2): 121-126]

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Although a towering figure in rhetoric and public address, Robert T. Oliver – scholar extraordinaire - has not received the attention he rightfully deserves for his contributions to the field of intercultural communication. Like any field in the humanities and social sciences, the communication discipline categorizes researchers and their research, forever sentencing them and their work to arbitrary academic compartments generally studied by those who classify themselves similarly. The field of “communication” did not exist when Robert T. Oliver began his academic career in the 1930's. It was called Speech in those days and rhetoric and public address were the heart, the essence of our discipline. The creation and proliferation of academic categories and compartments within Speech began in the early 50's and culminated in the field's newest moniker – communication -- and the invention of numerous communication sub-disciplines of which rhetoric and public address are just two. Academics like Robert Oliver whose contributions span multiple communication sub-disciplines - rhetoric, public address, intercultural communication, and political communication – are often not as visible or valued outside their chosen sub-discipline. Clearly, Robert Oliver is strongly identified with rhetoric and public address.

Although Professor Oliver rarely, if ever, used the words “intercultural communication” in his writings, which were considerable, he contributed significantly to the development of the field. After reviewing volumes of his work that span six decades, it's clear that his research helped frame the study of intercultural communication both in its inception and over time. This essay focuses on four major intercultural contributions of Professor Oliver's research – all prescient at the time and highly influential in the evolution of the field: (1) Critiquing the Eurocentric bias of rhetoric/communication, (2) offering an

Asiatic alternative to the study of rhetoric/communication, (3) utilizing an intracultural perspective to frame rhetoric/communication research, and (4) envisioning international diplomacy as a site for examining rhetoric/communication. It should be noted that the terms used to describe these contributions are not from Professor Oliver's writings: “Eurocentric,” “Asiatic,” and “intracultural,” emerge from late 20th and 21st century communication vocabulary and are utilized here to capture and describe Professor Oliver's contributions to the field of intercultural communication.

Eurocentric Bias of Rhetoric/Communication Studies

While there has been much debate about the Eurocentric bias of communication research, Professor Oliver may be the earliest scholar in our field to question the universality of Aristotle's rhetoric, suggesting it was inextricably tied to the “culture” of the West. Dr. Oliver (1959) argued in an essay on the Confucian rhetorical tradition of Korea during the Yi Dynasty that “the need for analysis of differing rhetorics deeply rooted in other cultures is not academic but urgently practical” (p. 364). He wrote in this essay that while Aristotle “... is the foundation of persuasion as it has been known and advocated in Anglo American and Western European communities”(p. 363), “... it becomes important to us in America and Europe to determine whether this rhetoric that depicts (and shapes) our own mode of conducting our communal affairs is universal, or whether it may be that we must now deal intimately with segments of the population that are accustomed to reason in different fashions.” (p. 364). Dr. Oliver's admonition to examine the cultural roots of rhetoric was a consistent theme throughout his writings.

Consider his landmark essay on Taoism in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1961) which described its “anti-rhetorical” nature: “In much talk there is great

weariness. It is best to keep silent.” He punctuated his analysis with the warning that “...far different from the rhetoric of Aristotle” Taoism should be examined because “... it shaped and now is helping to shape the nature of communion and communication of the millions of individuals in that Orient with which we must come to terms.” (p. 29). With the aplomb of a diplomat and the zeal of a dedicated interculturalist, Professor Oliver’s clarion call for understanding the Orient is among the earliest such academic pronouncements in our field and has echoed for generations, as relevant now as it was in 1961 or the early 1940’s when he first turned his attention to Eastern civilizations.

The word “Eurocentrism” did not seem to appear in Dr. Oliver’s writings; however, it’s apparent that he was among the first to rail about the Eurocentric nature of rhetoric/communication. In his book, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*, Dr. Oliver (1971) turned his sights on the newly emerging field of communication, and argued that “the East is not the West and “...cultures differ, and minds, feelings, and intentions in differing societies intermesh in differing ways” (p.3). He decried the “standards of rhetoric in the West,” arguing that “...they are not universals” but simply “... expressions of Western culture, applicable within the context of Western cultural values” (p. 3). So true and so poignant, and it served as a harbinger of the Eurocentric critiques of communication research that followed from such noted intercultural scholars as Molefi Asante, Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, Michael Prosser, K.S. Sitaram, Nemi Jain, and many others. My early research in the 1970’s also excoriated communication scholarship as Eurocentric and attempted to provide alternatives for conducting research within and across cultures that were not dominated by a white, U.S, Anglo- Saxon paradigm (Shuter, 1976, 1977a, 1977b, 1979). Professor Oliver’s work inspired many young intercultural scholars of the period and helped provide justification and direction for the fledgling field of intercultural communication.

Intracultural Contribution to Intercultural Communication/Communication Studies

Dr. Oliver tended to study rhetoric/communication within a specific country or world region – an “intracultural” perspective - rather than examining social and/or psychological factors integral to cross-cultural exchanges. He didn’t describe his research as intracultural because, as a scholar of rhetoric and public address, it was natural for him to examine a specific person, event, or audience. Each country he explored was approached with the same rhetorical precision as an audience analysis, and each orator he analyzed from Asia or Great Britain was skillfully executed from the perspective of the cultural audience from which he or

she emerged. As a result, Dr. Oliver produced literally volumes of analysis on intracultural communication in Korea – his life long penchant – and also China, India and Great Britain (Oliver, 1971, 1986). His analysis of Dr. Syngman Rhee, the first president of South Korea, may be the earliest incisive and intelligent investigation of an important North Asian speaker and the socio-cultural expectations and values that nourished him (Oliver, 1954, 1978).

Dr. Oliver’s intracultural perspective was informed by intensive study of culture coupled, frequently, with some type of field research, which usually included country visits, interviewing cultural elites and, in the case of Korea, government consulting. It was uncommon to find a committed rhetorical scholar like Dr. Oliver advocating field research; interestingly, he wrote candidly about its value in “The Rhetorical Implications of Taoism” published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1961.

The only advantage I can claim over many others who may with this purpose in mind toil over the translated texts, histories, and commentaries is that I have supplemented this bookish inquiry by sitting cross-legged for many hours, many times, at lacquered tables in dim-lit rooms, sipping Sul and exchanging views on perplexing passages of the Tao with varied types of Korean scholars. (p. 27)

His consultancy with the Korean government began around 1941 after leaving Bucknell University and establishing a speech writing/public relations business in Washington, D.C.. Through a chance meeting with Dr. Rhee, which was set up by Oliver’s acquaintance, Dr. Reverend Edward Junkin, the course of Dr. Oliver’s life changed dramatically (Oliver, 1997). Access to Dr. Rhee and his associates, which constituted the provincial Korean government during the Japanese occupation of Korea, resulted in a bevy of books and articles about the Korean conflict, many of which were published in the popular press (Oliver, 1952a, 1954, 1993). Consulting for Dr. Rhee also appears to have inspired Dr. Oliver’s life long interest and research on the continent of Asia, including China and India.

Clearly, Dr. Oliver was an advocate of intracultural investigations and may have been more influential than acknowledged on the intercultural scholarly pursuits of “cultural” scholars such as Gerry Philipsen, Donal Carbaugh, and Tamar Katriel, pioneers in the study of “culture of communication” (Philipsen, 1992), as well as my own work on the “centrality of culture,” which emphasized intracultural investigations (Shuter, 1990, 2008, 2010). Although different methodologically, these two approaches to intercultural communication - culture of communication and centrality of culture -- are driven by the shared belief that communication is wedded to

culture and cannot be understood without understanding the culture(s) of which it is a part. When I wrote in 1990 that intercultural communication scholars had to reclaim culture, conduct country and world region investigations, and even become area specialists, Dr. Oliver had done them all: A zealous advocate of culture, Dr. Oliver was a specialist first in East Asia, then turned his sights to South Asia. In fact, he may be first communication scholar to seriously examine Asia, another major contribution to the field and forerunner to what is now termed the Asiacentric approach to intercultural communication.

Asiacentric Contribution to Intercultural Communication/Communication Studies

Asiacentricity is a new term, first advanced in communication by Dr. Yoshitaka Miike (2002), that offers both a research agenda and in-depth communication analysis of Asia, a world region that Miike, Guo-Ming Chen and others argue has been sorely neglected by communication scholars (Chen & Miike, 2010). Dr. Oliver, as indicated in this essay, identified early on the Eurocentric bias of rhetorical research and turned his attention to Eastern civilizations where he attempted to uncover shared elements of what he initially called in 1959 "Confucian Rhetoric." His challenge, as he wrote, was to extract core elements of Confucian Rhetoric – certainly a harbinger of later Asiacentric studies – which he thought would help "... to understand what the Confucian East says to us (West), and to be able to speak meaningfully to it." (p. 365). Always the interculturalist, Dr. Oliver offered the specter of improved intercultural communication between Occident and Orient with serious intracultural analysis. Immersing himself in the Analects of Confucius, Dr. Oliver uncovered unique elements of Confucian Rhetoric, which he argued was far more influential than Taoism in the development of East Asia. Steeped in East Asian philosophy and thought, Dr. Oliver (1969) could parse the subtle but very real differences between Taoism and Confucianism, a distinction that few, if any, rhetoric/communication scholars of the time could make:

For whereas Lao-Tzu depended upon feeling and intuition, Confucius stressed rational understanding. Whereas Lao-Tzu believed that "images" of reality existed dimly within the shadowy forms that are perceived by men, Confucius pragmatically emphasized what may be clearly known and what is, therefore, indubitably true. Taoist rhetoric sees vagueness as a virtue and argumentation as futility; Confucianism strives for clarity and commends speech as a sharp knife with which to whittle away the sophistries and fallacies from a subject, leaving its true nature unsullied and unavoidable clear. (p. 3)

In fact, Oliver may be the earliest communication scholar to write about *jen* and *li*, two Confucian values that express the importance of community responsibility (*jen*) and appropriate conduct (*li*) in human affairs. Always careful to read and cite original texts, Dr. Oliver quoted Confucian Analects to support many of his claims. For example, Oliver argued that while Confucius advocated conformity to social conventions and appropriate speech Confucius also believed that communicators must retain their integrity: "Is earnestness in discourse a mark of the virtuous man or of a pretender of virtue" (Confucius as cited in Oliver, 1969, p. 4). Being truthful, according to Oliver, was very important to Confucius, and was the mark of a true gentleman: "A gentleman ... can see a question from all sides without bias. A small man is biased and can see a question from one side" (Confucius as cited in Oliver, 1969, p. 4). In Dr. Oliver's analysis of Mencius, a noted Chinese disciple of Confucius, he made the point, once again, that Confucian rhetoric emphasized truthfulness: "If a man speaks what he ought not to speak, he seeks favor by speech. If he does not speak what he ought to speak, he seeks favor by silence. In both cases, he is malicious and shameless" (Mencius as cited in Oliver, 1969, p. 5). These nuanced interpretations of *jen* and *li* are not common even among Asiacentrists who seem to emphasize social conformity rather than truthfulness in Confucian philosophy.

As much as Dr. Oliver enjoyed reprising his important insights about Korea and China, gleaned over decades of scholarly toil and contact with cultural elites, he also had an abiding interest in India, which he wrote about in his important book, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China* (Oliver, 1971). Published almost thirty years after his initial introduction to Eastern culture, the book offered analysis of Indian rhetoric, maybe the earliest in the field, extracted from close examination of ancient Indian texts, like the Rig-Veda and Brahmanas, as well as extensive writings about Gautama, who was generally recognized as Buddha. Professor Oliver's (1962) comparison of Gautama Buddha and Confucius – two of the most influential public philosophers in Eastern thought – was unique in topic and content since no communication scholar at the time, or afterward from what I can tell, examined their rhetorical similarities.

Like Confucius, Gautama's concern was with humanistic problems of how to live in this world, without worrying about the unanswerable questions of metaphysics. Like Confucius, Gautama believed that the kind of behavior which best satisfies one's associates will also best satisfy oneself. In short, he saw no conflict between the needs of the self and duty to society. Again like

Confucius, Gautama was intent upon identifying means by which the wisdom of the past could be brought to bear in solving problems of the present. (p. 62)

Dr. Oliver's scholarly immersion in the early writings on Buddhism and Hindu religious texts produced a rich understanding of ancient Indian rhetoric and provided additional foundation for articulating what Oliver called in 1971 "Asian rhetoric," which he believed characterized the communication of the East.

Asian rhetoric, unlike Dr. Oliver's early analysis of Confucian rhetoric, extended beyond East Asia, where Confucius was most influential, to South Asia, particularly India. Keenly aware of distinct cultural differences between East and South Asia, Dr. Oliver, nevertheless, was convinced that countries in these Asian regions – especially China, Korea, Japan and India – shared common and ancient philosophical premises and cultural values from which their rhetoric emerged. Moreover, Asian rhetoric, as he conceived it, was significantly different than rhetoric in the US and Europe precisely because the underlying cultural values were so different: "As such, its (Asian rhetoric) preferred methodology was not argument but exposition; its aim was not to overwhelm an opponent but to enlighten an inquirer. Its characteristic style was not the fervor of conviction but the earnestness of investigation" (Oliver, 1971, p. 259).

The characteristics of Asian rhetoric appears foundational to what Asia communication researchers, years later, associated with Asian discourse which Oliver defined as: Discourse that (1) seeks harmony with society and/or nature, (2) encourages social harmony between interactants and avoids argument, (3) relies on ceremonial communication influenced by custom, (4) emphasizes intuitive insight, analogy, and authority references rather than factual proof, (5) values silence as a distinct and rich form of communication, and (6) reserves opinion sharing to older and, hence, wiser communicators who may also function as authority figures (Oliver, 1971). Communication scholars like Roichi Okabe, Akira Miyahara, June Yum, Lucy Xing Lu, and Mary Garrett – Asian specialists who published important research years later than Dr. Oliver - may have been influenced by his early writings. Edward Hall's (1976) theory of low context/high context communication may have been impacted by the much earlier work of Oliver since high context communication, as Hall described it, was intuitive, abstract and unelaborated - characteristics strong identified with Asian communication, according to Hall and Oliver. In truth, Dr. Oliver's landmark Asian research, which began around 1942, influenced a generation of communication researchers in many specialties including intercultural communication.

Contribution to International Diplomacy and Intercultural Communication

In many ways a renaissance man, Dr Oliver read voraciously, wrote voluminously, and offered substantial insights on many topics including international relations and diplomacy. He appeared to live a dual yet interconnected life as academic extraordinaire and informal international diplomat. In addition to advising Syngman Rhee and the provincial Korean government beginning in the early 1940's, Dr. Oliver served as advisor in the 1950's to delegations of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations and also participated in 1953 in the Panmunjom truce discussions as personal counselor to Sygman Rhee, president of South Korea. His early and extensive diplomatic experience appeared to fuel serious scholarship in what Oliver (1950) initially referred to as the "speech of diplomacy" and then "speech in international affairs" (Oliver, 1952b). This area of inquiry emerged from what Oliver believed were two fundamental questions that drive world politics: "How does one government speak effectively to others; and how do people from one culture communicate their needs and aspirations to peoples of other cultures." (Oliver, 1962, p. xii). These questions are essential to intercultural communication, and while scant intercultural research has been devoted to how governments "speak" to one another, there has been abundant scholarship over the years on how people communicate across cultures. What made Oliver's diplomatic scholarship so seminal to intercultural communication was his life long analysis of the cultural roots of speech, rhetoric, and ultimately communication. Moreover, he turned his culturally informed mindset on the world's most serious social problems -- tenaciously tackling the rhetorics of war and peace, poverty and abundance. He was steadfast in the belief that without a deep understanding of national cultures, communicators – albeit, nations – will continue to seriously misunderstand one another.

Dr. Oliver reserved his most poignant cultural critique for the United States which he repeatedly criticized for its lack of cultural sophistication on the world stage. Courageous and dogged in his condemnation of the cultural myopia of his fellow citizens and their political representatives, Dr. Oliver (1962) lashed out at US culture.

"We (Americans) limit our view of how to deal with other people simply by the fact that our own culture is so early and so deeply imbedded into our individual psyches that we find it honestly very difficult to conceive of other systems of value or other modes of thinking" (p. 79).

This myopic view of the world, according to Oliver (1962), produced many "failures" in US international relations.

What we (Americans) have known was the *right* way of dealing with people has incredibly proved to be insufficient. On the whole, we have not yet been willing to concede that it may in fact be *wrong*. We have sought to try harder. We have tried to be generous in interpreting the resistance of the people who refuse to agree with us; but often we have become convinced that the nations or people we seek to influence are either hopelessly stupid or willfully wicked. They simply refuse to see reason. They refuse cooperation when our sole desire is to help them. They betray us when our generosity in helping them is absolutely unprecedented in international relations. No wonder we are confused. (p.153)

Certainly, Oliver was not the only critic of the US at the time; however, his commentary targeted the heart of Americana: What Americans thought and believed, and how they communicated. Generally practical and pragmatic, Oliver offered a solution to the US cultural conundrum which included, first, Americans disabusing themselves that their way of viewing the world is the only and best way and, second, that they learn what he called the “rhetorics” of other cultures, defined as the different philosophies, modes of thought, value systems, and communicative behavior integral to a society. This advice is as important today as it was over a half century ago when the world was split ideologically between Communism and Democracy and religiously /philosophically between East and West. Sadly, a similar divide dominates global affairs in the 21st century: Islam and Christianity are on collision course, and Occident and Orient are still puzzled by their respective cultures, though more aware than they were in 1962. In this environment, Dr. Oliver’s hue and cry for mutual understanding – a hallmark of his scholarship despite potent criticism of his country – is more important than ever, and the diplomats of the 21st century would be wise to heed his call.

Conclusion

Robert T. Oliver was no ordinary scholar. An iconic rhetorician, his research has been recognized by generations of scholars in rhetoric and public address. Less known and appreciated were his important contributions to intercultural communication explored in this essay. In truth, he was a trailblazer in examining the relationship between communication and culture, and although his focus was principally rhetoric, he was among the first in the field of communication to demonstrate how underlying cultural factors like values, religions, mindsets, and philosophies affect the way people communicate. A spirited interculturalist, Dr. Oliver understood the dire consequences of global misunderstanding in a nuclear age and, hence, implored

his readers to challenge their cultural habits and assumptions, and to learn deeply and comprehensively about cultures to which they do not belong. His unique roles as scholar and informal diplomat propelled him to the public stage, particularly during his early involvement in Korea and the UN, where he refined and tested his intercultural ideas while attempting to influence international public policy. Intercultural communication scholars owe Dr. Oliver a debt of gratitude for his formidable contributions to the field.

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Correspondence to:

Robert Shuter, Professor
Department of Communication Studies
Marquette University
100 W. Indian Creek Court, Milwaukee, WI 53217
Email: shuter@execpc.com

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