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A Space of Transition: Rethinking Surrogates

Abstract

Introduction

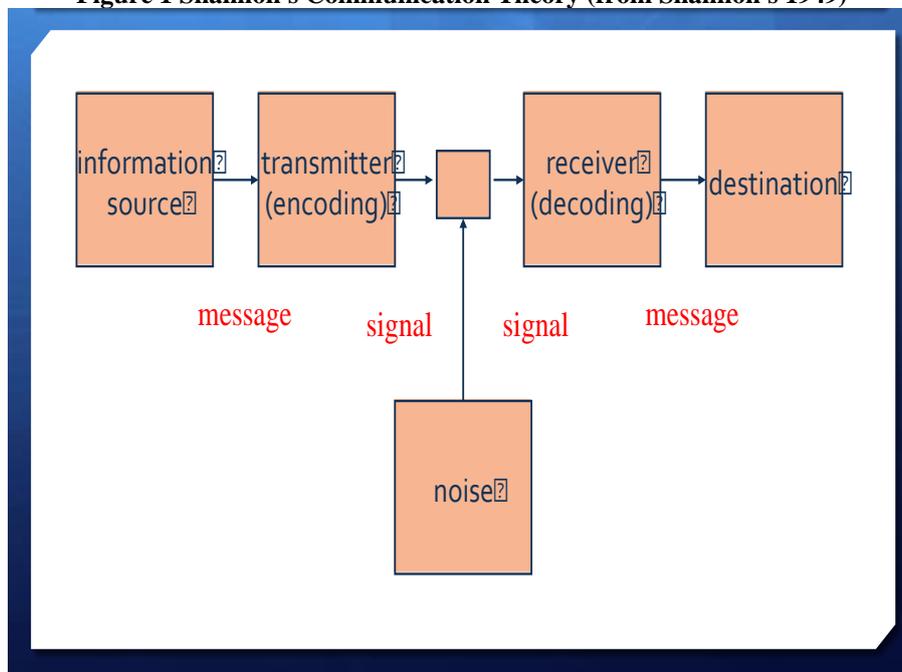
The knowledge organization (KO) process of representing something identifiable typically involves creating a surrogate. The surrogate brings together the thing and the knowledge organization system (KOS). Therefore, we decided to focus on the surrogate and its role in the process of representation. In current practice KOS govern the creation of the surrogate. This something being represented is typically, but not necessarily, an information resource. It may also be artistic, tangible, spiritual, etc., knowledge organization systems meant to organize surrogates that represent something identifiable. A knowledge organization professional (KOP) selects what aspects of the thing to include in the representation. The knowledge organization experts/establishment (KOE) are responsible for the development of the context in which surrogates are created. The KOE are key drivers in determining process, and in developing and maintaining standards. Traditional practices are intended to ensure consistency and uniformity of interpretation and application across a range of physical and digital discourses. This context can be considered anew as postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space (1994).

The Third Space

Bhabha's Third Space is an in between place, a place of transition. It is an integral part of communication. To produce meaning requires "... passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious." (Bhabha 1994, 37) That is, for meaning to be produced, what Shannon's Communication Theory would call the message must pass through a Third Space, an institutional space unconscious of the implications of its actions. This picture of producing meaning through the process of communication is akin to a cataloger, a knowledge organization professional or practitioner, analyzing a book to decide what about the book should be included in the catalog record: what physical aspects, what access points, what topics. Bhabha (1994, 37) explains that his Third Space, constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or *fixity* [emphasis added]; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rhetoricized and read anew."

Although Shannon's theory is now often deemed too rigid (see for example Chandler 1998), it is still the model we typically apply when creating surrogates (see Figure 1). The transmitter (e.g., cataloger) creates a "signal" to represent a "message." The signal is the surrogate representing the message. The signal passes through the channel ideally without change, then through a receiver intended to reproduce the message for the

Figure 1 Shannon's Communication Theory (from Shannon's 1949)



signal. The message and signal travel in one direction and proceed toward a passive destination or user. Change, when it comes, is in the negative form of noise which disrupts the ideal, orderly flow of signals through the channel.

The channel is portrayed as an empty, unnamed box, smaller than the rest of the functions in the model. This depiction is a sort of denial of legitimate change in the channel. Such change would be change to the surrogate. In Shannon's theory change breaks up consistency – change is negative. An unchanging signal is the desired surrogate in conventional KO.

However, the role of the channel and, therefore, of the surrogate, can be viewed in a radically different manner. Applying Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space to the knowledge organization process implies that the thing being represented is at the same time being "appropriated, translated, rhetoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 1994, 37) in the act of creating a surrogate. Variation blooms – there is no essential unity or universality to be created and enforced in the Third Space; there is no consistency; there is no mandate for standardization as the primary characteristic. The "discursive conditions of enunciation" (p. 37) are dominant discourses in the form of standards established largely by the KOE. These standards are employed largely by the KOP to create surrogates that then enunciate the culture and values enforced and propagated by the institutions harboring the Third Space: libraries, archives, other cultural heritage institutions and information services

The very existence of the Third Space as a dynamic passage explains that the meaning of a thing is not static as it passes through our knowledge organization process. A Third Space, being a place where appropriation, translation, rhetoricization and rereading occur is a space of transition. And what results from all of this activity, is the surrogate. However, the surrogate can never be an exact reflection of the thing it represents. "The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code." (Bhabha 1994, 36) Our knowledge organization process has been focused on looking into the mirror rather than getting behind the mirror. Looking into the mirror we might be reading things backward.

Borrowing theory from another context can lead from superficial parallels to bizarre or ridiculous conclusions. To discover whether or not Bhabha's Third Space goes beyond superficiality in paralleling the knowledge organization process so that it can serve to explain the process, we look first to research that seems a long way from our cataloger.

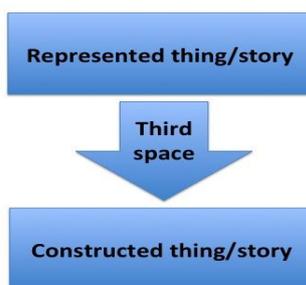
Exploring Pathways to Memory (EPTM): The Role and Power of Surrogates

As part of a four-year funded research project, an exploratory study examined the role of representation — in the form of tokens serving as memory cues — in sense-making, and memory recall for individuals with mild or early-stage Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) (Howarth and Hendry 2013). Representations here were seen to act as surrogates for some aspect identified in a participant’s personal narrative as expressed during an informal interview session. For example, a participant might tell a story that involved a particularly memorable birthday where chocolate cake was eaten. A representation – or “token” – that might evoke an association with that special birthday could be a box of chocolate cake mixture, or a photograph of a chocolate cake, or a papier-mâché model of a chocolate cake. Through the act of interpreting or “making sense” of the representation or surrogate, a participant might make an association that led to some recall of his/her initial story/narrative. That recall might be vivid and very close to the initial recollection, it might evoke the initial story with more details, or it might lead to recall of a different narrative altogether. Likewise, the “memory cue” or representative token might elicit no recall at all. Thus, the study made no attempt to be a tool for empirical assessment of memory recall; its intention was, instead, to examine how tokens might influence the nature of sense-making and recall, through such features as story context, sequence, content, and the richness of detail.

Based on an initial pilot, and subsequent study data, there was clear evidence that sense-making and recall of life stories using representative tokens fostered creativity and active engagement of participants. Stories were generally enriched with the introduction of memory cues (physical objects; photographs; audio clips; video clips; objects with texture or smell; etc.), and provided participants with a common and “neutral” space for engaging in conversation and rich social interaction with others.

In the ordinary course of creating a record or surrogate of a resource or object – the thing – the KOP has that thing “at hand” and, following specified rules, guidelines, or standards, crafts a stand-in representative of the intellectual and physical characteristics of it. The thing is analysed and interpreted by the KOP, who can choose what to include or omit, to highlight what is important or not, to offer some guidance to others as to how to approach or consider the thing. The KOP determines the (essential) characteristics of the thing, and intermediates between it and the ultimate user or users. In short, the KOP holds considerable power in devising the surrogate. Figure 2 illustrates conventional surrogate construction. The represented thing/story is akin to the message and the constructed thing/story to the signal.

Figure 2. Conventional Surrogation

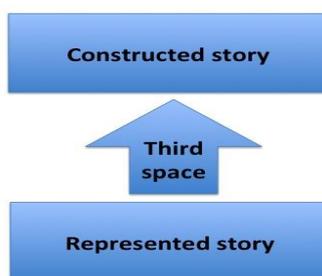


In the EPTM project, it was the “token” that “spoke to” the participant with mild AD who, in turn, provided the interpretation of the token and invested it with the role of representation. This surrogate was not of the thing per se, but of a *memory* of a person, place, event, activity or cherished entity (e.g., a pet) that had been important in the life of the individual. Even though the tokens were, themselves, chosen by the researchers with the intent of evoking an association, the memory surrogate was, ultimately, the exclusive creation of the user. It was the participant who validated the inherent “representativeness” of the token by retelling the story first told in the initial interview session in whole, in part, or not at all. Thus, in this case, the power of surrogation was at the discretion of the participant, and not at all in the hands of the researchers. Framed within a KO context, this would take the responsibility for creating and/or validating the surrogate away from the KOP, and investing it solely with the user. Figure 3 illustrates EPTM surrogate construction, describing this inversion of power effected by the token or thing in the process of surrogation.

The Mirror Image of Surrogation

The EPTM project suggests a reversal of the process of surrogation in that it is performed by an “end user” rather than a KOP and without the KOE-constructed context of a KOS. Further, the token that will become the surrogate for a memory pre-exists, and the story (the represented thing) may pre-exist, one or more variants may pre-exist, or it may be developed during surrogation.

Figure 3. EPTM Surrogation



Less radical changes in the role of the surrogate demonstrate that the process can be hybridized. Tagging, for example, typically includes a conventional surrogate which can be expanded by users adding tags after surrogation (e.g., Library of Congress FlickrTM Commons). Some web databases invite users to create surrogates according to KOS devised by KOE. Examples range from the Worthington [Ohio] Memory Project calling for volunteers <http://www.worthingtonmemory.org/volunteers.cfm> to MusicBrainz inviting site visitors to “[b]ecome a part of our global community and start contributing!” <http://musicbrainz.org/>. Both provide templates, instruction, and quality control. These examples illustrate a change in the context which is the Third Space, and demonstrate an alteration in the nature of the surrogate.

Surrogates and Surrogation in the Third Space

In the Third Space there is a seemingly ongoing power shift – from KOP applying KOS developed by KOE with a view to consistency, to a more communitarian approach whether in a local or global community. As part of this shift, the surrogate has shed its fixity and become a fluid component of a flexible system. Assignment of meaning has moved to the user who assumes responsibility for providing context and content in the process of surrogation. Operating outside of the boundaries of KOS, the user may add interpretations that, themselves, may foster meaning-chaining across platforms.

This shift can be illustrated with the following example. Consider a photograph of the Trevi Fountain in Rome, Italy (see Figure 4). The surrogate record of the picture that the KOP creates for the KOS will describe the physical characteristics of the photograph, and provide access to its subject, creator, and location. The Third Space surrogate would require that whatever personal meaning is evoked for an individual (also) be captured. It might be a trip to Rome; it might be an allusion to a film; it might be an allusion to a particular occasion of seeing the film; it might be seeing the film in the company of someone originally encountered on a trip to Rome; it might be some or all of these at different times. Given that that meaning could be manifest in multiple, diverse narratives, opportunities for linking very different surrogates – and the memories they represent – abound. Somewhat like a mind map, a photograph of the Trevi Fountain could foster linkages to memories that, themselves, suggest other connections, and to surrogates associated with those subsequent places, persons, events, activities, or other cherished entities. Not only would there be multiple opportunities for reinforcing a particular memory, but also spaces for enhancing, expanding, and moving well beyond, or diverging from, that memory, even to the point of creating an entirely new meaning-full entity.

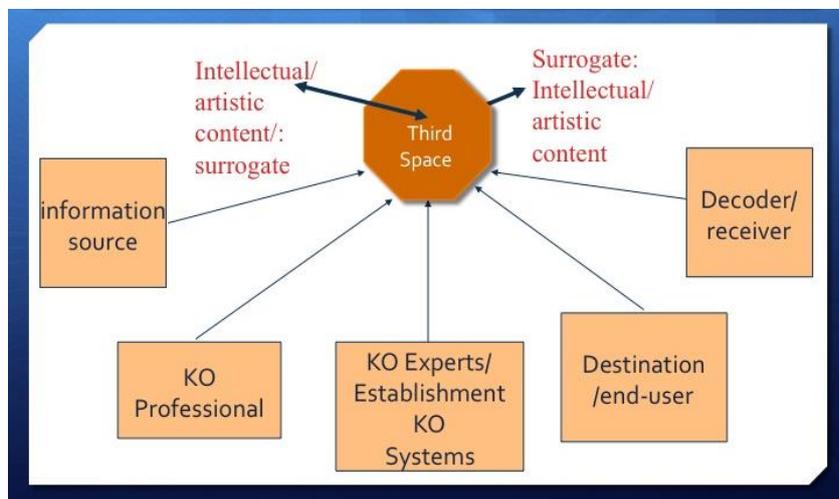
Figure 4. Trevi Fountain, Rome, Italy



The possibilities for connecting memory, and thereby, for encouraging a limitless number and direction of innovative linkages, suggests an even greater power for the surrogate – not only to lead to physical or digital “objects” – or resources in their broadest sense – but also to lead *away from* them to further discovery. For individuals dealing with cognitive decline, this new power of surrogates promises to open memory from something usually associated with the past, to a rich activity of unconstrained meaning-making in the present. For children, the connections encouraged by this re-visioned Third Space surrogation may simply be a further aid to imagination, and, no doubt, more conventional, though creative learning.

The Third Space displays and accommodates the various discourses brought to bear on the meaning of the surrogate. For example, the KOP may bring local facets while the KOE focuses on standardization for sharing (see figure 5 KO Discourses in the Third Space). Collectively these discourses construct the Third Space that in turn defines the meanings of the intellectual and artistic content of that mark the surrogate. Another outcome from the power shift from KOP and KOE to user is a repositioning of authority. As responsibility for validating the surrogate that represents the memory (or object, entity, etc.) moves to the individual, the “author” of that memory, as told in a personal narrative, becomes the sole “authority”. Validation of whatever constitutes the surrogate sufficiently to evoke “the memory”, or “a memory” rests with the narrator (originator). While that might suggest that each surrogate would thus become a unique representation, and by its attribution to one individual, be disconnected from the memory surrogates of another or others, the actual vehicle for linkage resides with the “token” – the surrogate that stands apart from all memories, but likewise serves as an anchor for individual memory.

Figure 5. KO Discourses in the Third Space



Conclusion

This is both the paradox and the power of the memory surrogate. This is also the point at which we might attempt to rejoin the usual practice of KO with Third Space surrogation. This is where we might reconcile their complementarity, rather than seeing divergent approaches and outcomes. The surrogates of physical and digital “objects” (in their broadest sense) created by KOP for KOS, and informed and “validated” by KOE standards, could be viewed as a first point of discovery, or a base for next-stage Third Space surrogation. Finding a photograph of the Trevi Fountain becomes the starting point for evoking memory, whose Third Space surrogation launches, in turn, potentially limitless meaning-chaining and further linkages to other memory surrogates – whether supported by KOS surrogates or otherwise. In this latter scenario, the surrogate ceases to be a static representation of a “real” thing, becoming, instead, a kind of engine or driver for meaning-making, likewise for memory-making.

Social media and opportunities for group engagement in a variety of creative activities online – both those reliant on specialized skills, and those welcoming to the novice – have fostered an environment that thrives on changeability and high risk. Patience for information delivered top-down, and seen to be the (sole) domain of an exclusive cadre of experts is waning. Our suggested rethinking of the surrogate from the perspective of Bhabha’s Third Space offers an alternative. Likewise, this apparent move to greater fluidity should foster a greater tolerance for rapid, sometimes unpredictable change, offering the potential for a sustainable future for KO.

Acknowledgement

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