COMMUNICATION FORMS

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Keywords: anonymity, code, conversation, feedback, functionalism, medium of communication, objectivity, receiver, sender, subject, symbol, virtual community, virtuality, writing

Contents

Summary

In many languages, for example German, communication is foreign word which became current only around 1970. Since the sixties studies in communication and mass media have expanded tremendously, and communication studies is now a core subject in many humanities curriculums. In its most simplified version communication is seen as the encoding of a message in a specific code, transmitted through the medium, received by the receiver, and decoded according to the same code. The main problem with the extremely simplified model of communication is, however, that it portrays communication as a one-way process, overlooking the constant feedback that is steering the communication. It is clear that language and all other means of significant communication are not private to any individual. We are born into a society which always already has these means of communication at its disposal. Communication through language is entirely a learned activity. As a *milieu externe* language makes for stable relationships, social contracts and a given order. One is born into it and grows within it, and one has to accept its rules. The invention of writing was one of the most important events in the history of communication over a distance. Reading is a cultural

technique which we learn in order to communicate in modern societies, and has become a precondition of taking part in much of the cultural activity of modern nations. As soon as human beings gathered in greater numbers, in towns and empires, as crowds in the market place, in tribunals and courts, religious temples, or armies, the need arose to address them not as individuals but as masses. While mass communication is possible without the modern media, it was the invention and use of mass media, such as printed books, large-circulation newspapers and magazines, radio, motion pictures, and television, which made mass communication possible beyond the reach of an individual presence. At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, writers, artists, linguists, philosophers and sociologist experienced a sudden change in the communication structures of modern societies. There was talk of a language crisis.

1. What is communication?

Far into the twentieth century universities had departments which taught languages and literatures, but communication was not an academic discipline. It was taught to a certain extent in such subjects as linguistics or ethnology, but the explosion of mass communication had little impact on the organisational structure of universities for a long time. In many languages, for example German, communication is a foreign word which became current only around 1970. The concept of *Human Communication* was introduced to Germans by a book of Paul Watzlawick, Don D. Jackson und John Beavin of that title. At that time they still had to explain and apologize for the then unknown concept "communication". The concept was needed, because on the one hand new media of communication challenged our knowledge of how we transmit knowledge and talk to each other, and on the other hand, because psychologists and sociologists began to focus on certain disfunctional verbal and communicative behaviour in everyday situations. Recent studies have warned that the use of modern media of communication have created a group of people who live in isolation from direct communicative contact with other people, and who feel intensely lonely. There is an obvious need to explore the possibilities and the dangers of the new media. Since the sixties studies in communication and mass media have expanded tremendously, and communication studies is now a core subject in many humanities curriculums.

1.1 A simplified model of communication

An extremely simplified model of communication reduces the process of communication to three elements: 1. the sender, 2. the medium of communication, 3. the receiver. In its most simplified version communication is seen as the encoding of a message in a specific code, transmitted through the medium, received by the receiver, and decoded according to the same code.

It is obvious that all these terms refer to a number of unresolved problems, and that communication is neither as linear nor as simple as this model suggests. The terms "sender" and "receiver" suggest an apparatus which seems to exclude consciousness at the two endpoints of the chain. But, of course, such mechanical senders are not really communicating, they merely transmit information. In order to communicate, the sender needs to have an intention to communicate, and the receiver needs to have the intention to understand the the communication. Communication thus entails the very problematic

term of the "subject", an entity which has a reflexive consciousness of itself and its mental and physical actions.

Another problematic term is "code". What happens at the point of the "sender" and the point of the "receiver" is much more complex and in a way quite different from the "encoding" and "decoding" of, say, a text into and from a cypher. One could argue that there is no consciousness except with the help of signs, and that the process of coding is really a process of the interior selfreflexive presence of a consciousness with the help of signs. These same signs are used without coding to transmit the message. The signifier (word, symbol) which I use not only represents, but in a way is inseparable from the signified (thought, meaning) I want to communicate. The problem is not that anything is coded in a kind of cypher, but the fact that sender and receiver either do or do not combine the same signifier with the same signified. Misunderstanding occurs, where the mapping of a signifier onto a signified differs in sender and receiver; such misunderstanding is possible in one's home language, but occurs even more commonly in a situation, where the language used is a foreign language, a strange dialect or a strange sociolect. Even an English speaker will have some problems with such South African terms as "robot" or "stoep". Somebody not familiar with modern mathematics will not understand the precise way in which mathematicians use the word "chaos". And although it sounds English, the English speaker will be puzzled by the German word "Handy".

The signs which we use to communicate are to be thought as being in a relationship to the author (sender) and thus are a symptom or indicator of the interior of the author, they express his interiority in communication (expressive function of the sign). But the sign also refers to the recipient (receiver) and are to be seen as a signal which attempts to steer the behaviour of the recipient (vocative function of the sign). Finally the sign is bound to the phenomena of life, they are thus symbols to describe the world as we perceive it (descriptive function of the sign). In order to understand communication with the help of signs we need to understand the semantics of a signs, that is the relationship between expression and content; the syntagmatics of the sign, that is the relationship between the signs themselves, and finally the pragmatics, the way subjects use signs to communicate.

The main problem with the extremely simplified model of communication given above is, however, that it portrays communication as a one-way process (which can of course be reversed, the receiver can become the sender and vice versa). It completely overlooks that there is always a feedback loop which impacts on the sender while the sender is broadcasting a message. In direct communication, where the sender can see and hear the receiver, this is obvious. As a receiver I express attention, boredom, indifference, antagonism, understanding, puzzlement, and a whole host of other reactions to the message, which in turn can influence the sender to modify his message. Unless the sender is totally egocentric he will in turn receive these messages and act accordingly, so as to best achieve the result intended.

If the message is, however, transmitted by some other medium (telephone, print, radio, television, internet), this feedback loop is time-lagged and usually attenuated to such a degree that the sender can only ascertain the reaction of the receiver, if he explicitly

provides a channel for the feedback (readers letters, phone-in, research, questionnaires etc.). Nevertheless, if the sender disregards the feedback, he may soon find himself addressing nobody anymore: his receivers may have switched off without him noticing it. This is something which many communicators overlook completely, if they find themselves in a hierarchically superior position, that is, if the process is essentially one way from the sender to the receiver (as in many mass communication situations). Therefore senders in such situations often sound flat, hollow, contrived, artificial or even inhuman. By speaking in a language that is distant, uninviting, arrogant, they built walls between themselves and their intended receivers. Such senders often find that they are no longer talking to anyone. (*see Structures of Culture and Communication Forms*)

1.2 The "subjects" of the communication process and their desire to communicate

Not all philosophers of language focus on the communicative aspect of language. Some attempt to find some secret metaphysical or religious essence in language, for example Walter Benjamin in his speculations entitled *Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, where he attempted to recover a God-given language of sound-names from the multitude of human languages. Similar speculations can be found in many mystical religious texts in many religions. When we talk about communication, language and thinking, we cannot avoid one of the most fundamental questions of philosophy: are human beings creations of God or a part of nature, a product and prisoner of history or a product of his own decisions, victim of a social process or subject of a free communication.

We have so far portrayed the sender and the receiver as subjects, so as to avoid the perception that we are dealing with two mechanical contraptions, which work like automatons. But the concept of the subject is itself not unproblematic. It has been suggested that human beings are "constituted" as subjects or individuals, who seem to act according to their own "free will". This is brought about by our socialisation, and it can be argued, that the real agents of communication are not "subjects", but such entities as "the society" or "the economy". One could, for example, regard society, the state or the economy as a self-reproducing desiring machine which has the will to reproduce itself, as a machine which is not "unified", but distributed across many units. The economy, for example, would thus use the state, society and the organs of the biological machines (human beings) to reproduce itself. The economic machine uses my brain, the various parts of my body, my feeling, and my language to organise itself in such a way that it can best achieve its intention, in the same way as the flower of the clover uses the bumble bee to reproduce itself.

It is clear that language and all other means of significant communication are not private to any individual. We are born into a society which always already has these means of communication at its disposal. The information which is contained in any language (not only verbal language) is the knowledge store of any society. As such, language is a means to produce and to reproduce the society. The transmission of this knowledge is essential for the survival of any human society, and is at the core of any culture. The knowledge contained in language is, however, not neutral. It is the knowledge used to govern and control society in such a way as to organise it optimally, if not free of

disturbances. On the other hand, it forms the very basis of "individuality" in that it allows us to conceive of ourselves as distinct from others. Much of the knowledge contained in language is not explicitly at our disposal. As many ethnologist have found, when interrogating members of other cultures, we do not understand or have a rational explanation for much of what we do or say. Much in the process of communication is thus "subconscious" or "unconscious" that is inaccessible to our everyday consciousness. Much of what we feel is socially (linguistically) preformed, and much of what we want is directed by images produced socially. The process of socialisation through which we acquire language and the orientations which make communication possible is never completely successful. All individuals retain some form of *Eigensinn,* that is a socially uncontrolled desire. In the worst case socialisation breaks down partially or completely and produces an individual incapable of communication and cooperating. Such breakdowns are obvious in neuroses and psychoses.

Communication is never a perfect process. It functions because we can perceive and rectify its misfunction. Because of the feedback loop described above we become aware of the breakdown in a particular communication situation and are able to reflect on the cause and finally attempt to rectify the situation. Where communication breaks down we endeavour to improve the means of communication (for example by inventing "logic" as a means of limiting meaning where two speakers assert incompatible statements). But the one who pretends to know (everything), the one who sets himself up as an authority, limits the communication between two subjects, by denying his counterpart the authority to speak as an equal. Whether it is the absolute monarchy or the all-knowing church or the ideologue who has the answer to all questions - real communication is possible only in a truly democratic situation, as Friedrich Schlegel has argued against Kant's plea for an enlightened monarchy.

At the basis of every communication is a desire. This desire needs to be organised in and through the structures of language to become perceptible, but desire produces elements in every communication which are beyond the minimal elements necessary to utter a statement, command or question. Rhythm, prosody, body language transport desires not only in poetry, but in everyday language. There is a constant tension between the signifier which cuts the objects of our discourse into discrete parts and the flow of the desire noticable in verbal and non-verbal rhythms and melodies. Language and communication couple the energy of our desires to the social machine.

Language is basically structured in a binary way: [+male] [-male], [+good] [-good]. The meaning of every signifier is determined by its position in this binary structure. The desire, which can be imagined as an undivided flow, has to discipline itself in this binary structure which divides us into opposites. Because of that sensitive people everywhere always had the feeling which Schiller once expressed in the sentence: "If your soul *speaks*, it is no longer the *soul* which speaks." It seems that we can communicate only insofar as we accept this loss of something essential in what we want to communicate. We need not to go as far as Parmenides of Elea who doubted that there is any truth in human language and decreed that everything we say in our language is an empty sound. For we cannot even think this thought without words, because words or signs in general are the very building blocks of any thought. Language is not merely a

medium or filter of our thoughts: despite the fact that we can distinguish between the rather arbitrary sound ("table") and the meaning attached to this sound ("table"), they form an inseparable unity. While in other languages the meaning might be expressed by other sounds ("Tisch"), there is always a definite relationship between a sound pattern and a meaning. Any linguistic communication presupposes our ability to distinguish between meaning and the means through which we express that meaning. Because we can do that we can judge a linguistic communication to be either adequate or inadequate.

While words in themselves signal a meaning, they really function in variable word contexts and change their meaning in relation to the sentence and the text they form part of, as well as the speech situation in which they function ("You are really wonderful" can be praise or an ironic statement meaning the exact opposite). Voice is an object in reality: it can be recorded and analysed as a physical event according to volume, pitch, and timbre. But these physical entities also indicate emotional meaning. Language as a virtual entity is carried by a real voice, but can also be embodied in other real signs.

2. Direct Communication

At the beginning of human communication stands the direct communication from person to person. This form of communication is still experienced by most human beings as the most "natural" form of communication and for many is still the only form of communication they know.

In and through language we achieve a stability of (cultural) regulatory devices (customs, laws) which last longer than a spontaneous idea. The establishment of duration in human culture is only possible because of signs, language, memory, and communicative reciprocity. Human communities are based on discourse, on human speech about human concerns. Language is the medium of reciprocity without which not even the hypothetical *contrat social* is possible that is the foundation of society. Before the individuals can even talk about any of the institutions which make up a society, they must be able to talk. Whatever form of association the gregarious animal human being had, in order to become a human society, the members of that association had to begin to communicate in language. The basis for all forms of communication is direct (face to face) communication through language. (*see Direct communication*)

2.1 Learning Communication in the Family

Communication through language is entirely a learned activity. Despite the fact that our brain seems to be wired in such a way that language is possible, specific languages are not inborn and "natural", they can only be acquired in a cultural surrounding. That surrounding is normally the family, although "family" can mean different things in different cultures. From the wide ranging and large family structures to very small one parent one child structures we can find nearly every variation in different cultures.

The newly born human being is completely helpless and in fact has not completed his prenatal development, which would take one years and nine months in comparable species. The last year of the embryo development is, as it were, transferred into an

extrauterine existence, which has a tremendous influence on the baby's abilities of sensory perception, motor skills and language acquisition. Because the contact with the external world comes "too early", but at a stadium of highest flexibility, the development of the human baby is put in a mode of acquisition of its own experience from very early on. Human beings have to learn a lot: walking and standing, the coordination of sensory perception so as to use the hands effectively, speaking and fitting into a social surrounding. These things are not automatic as they are with most animals. But because so much of our behavior has to be learned, human beings have a cultural variability far beyond that of any other animal.

People recognize each other from the sound of their voice. Like many other animals humans can produce sounds, but our sounds are much richer and capable of much more variation and modulation than those of even our nearest cognates. Hobbes had argued already that language is unique to human beings. Where animals seem to understand language, they merely interpret them as signals to do something, without understanding the meaning of words. The sounds which other animals produce are determined genetically and are bound to specific situations and not arbitrary and conventional. The ability of certain birds to mimic sounds is no exception. None of these sounds can be called a language, because a language must refer to objects and concepts. Because words in human languages are conventional, word sounds can be replaced by other arbitrary and conventional signifiers such as images, letters or gestures.

2.2 Communication in small scale societies

Human beings are tool-using animals. Just as every tool takes over a special function, so language has the function of organising our contact with the world. Language tackles the world by transferring reality into virtuality. Instead of touching, moving, grasping objects, language takes over instead of other organs, and saves energy, becomes a replacement for work not performed, for work that does not need to be performed. I do not need to walk to an object, to point to it, to perform a mime of what is to be done to it. I can speak and explain what is to be done. With language I can plan an action, because language does not need individual arrangements for each occassion, it is an institution with existing rules, and which makes certain that understanding will be achieved. As a *milieu externe* language makes for stable relationships, social contracts and a given order. One is born into it and grows within it, and one has to accept its rules, one needs to learn how to handle it, a process which is never quite complete. Just as our upright walk is based on a fragile equilibrium, talking and communication is based on an equilibrium which we must constantly recover. Communciation is a psychic ability which is given by our physical body and its organisation but not guaranteed. When Peter Handke's Kaspar is taught how to speak, he starts of with the sentence: "I want to be such a one, as someone has been before." As a speaker I am like an Other, I am exchangable, because the structure of communication and its perspectivity is built on this reciprocity. Being for the Other is a structural condition of communication. While I can experience myself as the centre of an interior surrounded by my body, opaque for any Other in everything which happens inside me, surrounded by a horizon which accompanies me wherever I move, language breaks through this immanence. In language there is no *solus ipse*, nobody who is alone himself. The illusion that one is an individual independent of one's society is created under certain social conditions of

privilege, and can lead to forms of individualism and subjectivism, even solipsism. It arises, for example, where individuals involved in knowledge production are largely freed from practical action.

Cultures are always selective and no culture makes use of the complete range of variability of human nature. Being socialised in one specific culture therefore limits the individual, and such one-sidedness leads to blindness in relation to the limitations of their norms and behaviour patterns by social constraints. Normally we are neither aware of our one-sidedness nor our limitations and we consider the framework within which we act as normal and as the only possible one: everything has to be as it really is in our society. The cultural frame surrounds us and locks us in. It is only when we are confronted with other cultures and their different framework that we begin to experience the limitations of our own culture. For most this is an unsettling experience and they re-establish the comfortable surrounding of their own culture as the only possible one by denigrating the choices of the foreign culture. Xenophobia and monocultural feelings of superiority flourished among the colonizing nations of Europe, but also in the Chinese Empire of the Centre. A few individuals, often professional academics who were studying foreign cultures (historians, sociologists, psychologists, ethnologists) began to understand the limits of their own culture not as the only possible and correct system, but as one of the many possibilities of arranging the affairs of a human society. They began to understand that each system of language, custom, tradition and values as a selection process which reflected the interests of a particular society. In contrast to animals who are completely and irrevocably caught within their *Umwelt* (the objects and their relations which they can perceive), human beings, even if they are often surrounded by their culture in a similar form, can break through these limitations, and develop an intercultural or transcultural competence. Habits and cultural traditions, although extremely persistent, can change, and we can translate from one language into another, we can understand cultural structures of other traditions, both contemporary and historical. Such "translations" are in fact part of our cultural competence within our own culture, when we attempt to understand the communications of others whose worldview is different from ours. In addition, as Friedrich Schlegel has pointed out, every communication, and especially every artistic communication, knows more thant it says, and wants more than it knows. We are in fact not entirely in control of what we want to say, and how we are able to say it, and we certainly do not always know what we have said in fact.

Because the meaning of words in all languages depends on the thoughts, concepts and images of the one who uses the language, there is the possiblity of a failure of communication even among speakers of the same language in the same country. In a certain sense one could say that everyone really speaks his own language, even if he uses the same words as we do, and that all communication presupposes the ability to translate the ideas of the other into one's own ideas. The difficulties are merely enhanced when we deal with communcations in another language or emanating from another historical period. John Locke has pointed out that in the case of ancient documents like the Bible much of the exact connotation of the concepts, the mindset, habits, language use and forms have been lost to us, and that our interpretation of such texts is always conjectural. Nevertheless translations, however inadequate, are always possible.

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Biographical Sketch

Peter Horn studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992),the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students

(1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for *Poems 1964-1989*), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.