

COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING*
Or arguments for a wider pragmatic understanding
of ideas on the linguistic expression, meaning and thing

Bogdan Bogdanov

As is well-known, there is no generally accepted view about what communication is. Communication is discussed on the basis of models with different scopes. According to some theories of communication with a larger scope, even animals and plants communicate. More frequently, however, communication is considered as a typical human phenomenon, conditioned by man's linguistic and social competence. But even in this case, the basic characteristic features of communication are determined in different ways.

Amongst these features there are also less disputable ones, such as understanding. Hence the grounds for the intrinsic assertion that communication is human communicating in which understandings are exchanged or in which messages remain that are not understood. Without doubt, by understanding we intend the currently evolving scientific idea that human communication constitutes itself in a context-situation the one that understanding by available rules, norms and meanings, on which communicators rely in the process of configuring and sending messages. This obviously concerns direct and indirect communicating, as well as verbal and non-verbal exchange of information by means of gestures, mimicry and images.

According to this model, communication occurs on several levels. Communicators rely on the verbal message, as well as on the accompanying non-verbal message. Or, in the language of computer science, the human communicative act is construed as comprising and complementing one sort of digital message with another sort of analogue message. This dual or rather multiple encoding of the message in communication corresponds to the contemporary model of how the human brain functions: that the brain's different sections or structures encode signals coming from outside in view of their eventual usage under different circumstances.

Probably to this end the human communicative attitude is that one and the same information can be understood in at least two ways. This is manifest not only in a differently configured message on the lines of verbal and non-verbal communicating, but also in the ambiguously organised flow of the communicative verbal act. A certain understanding of the sender's message is not only understood equally-differently on the other side of the communicative act, but becomes different from its primary variant in the process of communication it, even for the one who sends it.

In addition, the information of the verbal message itself is dual or more signifying. It is construed so as to be understood in different ways in the communicative act, as well as changing in regard to one task or another. This also holds for the particular word which is always polysemic, as well as for any linguistic expression, for they combine several meanings and can refer to several things. Particular words are more indisputably polysemic,

* Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies New Bulgarian University www.nbu.bg, Second Late Spring School in Semiotics LSSS' 2007 - „Semiotics or Philosophy of Language?", Sofia, Bulgaria, May 28-29, 2007

whereas expressions and texts, due to specifications they develop are less polysemic, at least at first sight.

Of course, verbal message in itself is a conditional state. Even in examples of one word or phrase the use is readily available and there is a choice of one meaning instead of another. However that may be, neither this use nor any use whatsoever specifies the meaning of a linguistic expression to the extent that its polysemy is obliterated. This polysemy always remains as an internal resource for generating other understandings. That happens either by steering a linguistic expression towards another meaning or by referring to another thing.

However that may be, when it is considered by itself or, as it were, unused, a linguistic expression has, at the very least, a dual meaning and a dual message, combining an explicit and implicit meaning, if nothing else. These two meanings-messages can also be ordered successively. That happens in cases where something said is clarified by a saying related to it – in this way an ambiguous message is presented in a range of two messages.

Expressed separately, however, each of them promptly inclines to become ambiguous. The speaker is aware of this ambiguity and, eluding it, he continues in a linear way by explicating again and again the generated implicit meanings. But ideal textual linearity can be achieved in an instant.

No message and no meaning can be self-identical because, being a linguistic form, it designates and denotes, but the meaning does not correspond to the denoted thing. Just as a linguistic expression is related to other expressions, a meaning is related to other meanings. In addition, the thing loosely corresponds to the linguistic expression and the meaning, because it is related with other things in many ways.

Thus in every linguistic expression meanings or possible messages are given as stratified – in the sense that one of them is the expression of another. Or in the sense that a concrete message is attached to a general message motivating the former which does not refer to the thing commented upon, but to the context of that speaking or to the larger context of the world. In most cases, the concrete message intends the two contexts at the same time.

Or we can conclude with difficulty on the issue of understanding and the communicative act – an understanding is always manifested in several combined understandings. This also corresponds to the dual setting of the communicative act which, besides this act, is also the model of another similar act constituted under different circumstances.

Or just as a speech act, the communicative act has an actual-model structure: it occurs here and now, but it models and situates an eventual act occurring in any place at any time. Just as the brain's activity prepares more uses, the communicative act combines more messages and meanings, starting from a basic primary message and developing a secondary message which specifies and changes the former.

The text of the so-called primary verbal message is organized in a similar way. Its explicit meaning is stratified upon other implicit meanings which can also emerge in the foreground in the process of this communicative act. One reason for this ambiguity is that this linguistic expression and message is something ready-made, available and in this sense already used, as well as something that has to change to a certain extent so as to serve actually, here and now.

This is due to a kind of rotation of the “kaleidoscope” of what is already given and which has to have at least two meanings.

In this sense the understanding, faced with polysemy, is called upon choosing one meaning and disregarding another and combining meanings in regard of one concrete application or another. Understanding is not only the understanding of something given as existing in a context of things, but also a step-wise making. Above all, understanding is the making of an actual meaning and a thing. The thing can be an existing one which is only specified and in this sense elaborated. Or it may be a non-existing one and the communicative act can assure its existence. This means that the thing is posited in relation to other existing things, as well as assuring a community which understands or accepts the existence of that thing, the context of other things and the meanings produced for this purpose.

This making in the act of communicating not only makes something and its context. When a communication occurs, the complex multilayered content of the message is refined and thus communicators undergo a change. Even in an act of the most elementary notifying of something they achieve another adjustment with the context of the concrete communication as well as with the most extensive possible context of the world, by means of the former.

Or we might express the same by means of a formula – understanding understood in this way, which is achieved in the process of the communicative act and which, in addition, is expressed in happening-making: of a thing, of a context of things and a more general context of the world and the community of those who understand in this way. All these makings together change the participants in the communicative act – in its process they become different, to one extent or another. This happening is also a kind of making, insofar as it not only happens, but is made.

This leads to the following completely enlarged understanding of the nature of the human communicative act – a living situation of a passing move to something else. That is why, according to an authoritative model, communication occurs not only when some people are really communicating, but also when a person is alone and in a state of mental activity. In this case he communicates with himself as another or, on the level of understanding he is in a mental action of understanding himself in the world which means an understanding of something and a context. The point of view of the action and the need of the other for communicating are always at hand.

Obviously the communicative act is fruitfully considered not only as a communicating between people for exchanging information and understanding-happening-making, but also as an elapsing situation in which communicators achieve a new attitude in a changing world depending on them.

At the same time the practical question is raised that, since there are so many available models of understanding what the human communicative act represents, whether one of them is the best, which would be a reason for choosing it as a model of understanding. That is unlikely. As with all things, also in this case thinking accumulates more models in view of different tasks for the solving of which they are useful. For, being linguistic entities, these models are true in a twofold sense. They ostend something existing and also show that in some way they are making this thing.

Nonetheless, insofar as the choice is independent of the task, it can be based on the average principle of good measure. We can take the line that the chosen model of communication is neither too narrow, directed towards understanding or an immanent change in the understanding community who, because of that, change the message itself; nor too large, so that the idea of communication would become blurred with the line of the so-called flowing living situation.

Hence the appropriate point of view of delimitation which directs the topic of communication towards its manifestation as speech activity. In this model the topics of understanding and acting are preserved. Besides, an eventual observation can pass onto the discernible materials of the text of the message and the secondary text of the communication. A third strand of the line of action is the resource of understanding the speech act in a larger sense as pervaded and completed by non-verbal gestures, using images and other sign systems.

There is also a resource for something else – the text of verbal and non-verbal communication to be pervaded and to pervade in regular human doings and makings of things without words. Because in doing something and by means of what is said, the human being is speaking, as it were, and when he does something silently – either with a mental parallel of an external silent making or with an internal silence, in either case he is moved towards a sense by a reason and purpose. Evidently both acts – of thinking when speaking and thinking when silently making, amalgamate with something more general which may be called speaking, not only in a metaphorical sense.

And another thing – on the basis of the presented model of communication we can say that there is a speech activity of the communicator who speaks but ostensibly does not communicate. Since he is in speech, however, there are others at his disposal with whom he communicates indirectly and still others in the virtual community of those who understand or should understand as he does. Depending on the speech, the communicator may have to do with a community listening to his monologue or with an imagined other person in a dialogue or with himself as the other in an eventual internal dialogue.

On this communicative base an applicable typology can be expounded for kinds of discourse. This typology would preserve and sustain the wider pragmatic conception of speech as a communicative act and would allow for developing a pragmatic theory of meaning. The basic principle of such a theory would be that every saying and speaking are to be understood as understanding and as making, as well as a change in the communicators in regard to a new attitude. Such a theory of meaning could be improved depending on how well the means at its disposal are combined successively, for discriminating analyses as well as for an indiscriminate understanding of speech activity that is not isolated from other human activities treated by pragmatics in a large sense of the word as a general theory of human activity.

But for that it may be too early.