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## **On the Communicative Construction of Reality**

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### **1. Introduction**

Historians of science noted some time ago that, contrary to the former optimistic belief of Enlightenment philosophy, science did not develop in an unbroken progress of fact and theory<sup>1</sup>. The “normal” paradigm was only rarely transformed in a radical fashion. If this was the case in sciences which, ideally, relied on an exchange of findings and ideas within a universal community of investigators, and were to a certain extent independent of the “idols of the tribe”, one might have been even more resistant to revolutionary change.

To be sure, the growth of knowledge in these fields, too, depends on communication with a transnational republic of scholars. However, both the “classical” humanities and the social sciences are more intimately tied to the persistent conservative traditions of national cultures than the physical sciences. These disciplines are an integral part of literary, political and ideological communication within their national cultures. Influence runs in both directions.

There is an additional aspect to the social and cultural embeddedness of the humanities and social sciences. No doubt, all scientific activity is situated historically and culturally. But the humanities and social sciences are part of their own subject matter. To use a metaphor: the physical sciences look from the inside out; the humanities and the social sciences look from the inside out, at the inside. Not only is language rather than mathematics their medium of communication, language is also constitutive of the human reality they investigate. These disciplines are therefore reflexive in a sense the physical sciences are not. They are more directly and at the same time more subtly influenced by the world view of the society in which they are located. In their striving for objectivity and systematic accumulation of knowledge they must reckon with this circumstance, especially because this circumstance generally tends to encourage a certain resistance to change with regard to the “normal” presuppositions of their investigations.

It is therefore hardly surprising that even disciplines that try to penetrate language and social life as universal aspects of the human condition rather than study, e.g., the history of their national literatures or the organization of their local societies, their laws and their economy, tend to exhibit distinctly particularistic traits – in addition to paradigmatic traditionalism. Modern social theory and the theory of language provide good examples.

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<sup>1</sup> For the physical sciences this was convincingly shown by Thomas Kuhn.

During the early stages of their formation, the major scholarly traditions of these disciplines, French, British, German and American, followed somewhat different paths. However, they had two things in common beyond their subject matter. With few exceptions, they surprisingly not only shared a lack of interest in the older traditions of the philosophy of language and social philosophy, they also, less surprisingly, stubbornly ignored one another. One notable exception at the beginning of the twentieth century was the collaboration of the eminent linguist Antoine Meillet at the *Année Sociologique* with its founder Emile Durkheim another, less specific exception could be found in German and American ethnology of that time. However, in these countries ethnology was less closely connected to sociology than in France.

The mutual avoidance of sociology and linguistics is rather difficult to explain. After all, a systematic connection between the theory of language and the theory of society had been proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early decades of the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>. However, for various reasons, Humboldt's thought exerted only a limited influence during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Traces of his thinking can be found in the primarily German investigations of semantic fields and in the American Sapir-Whorf simplification, even distortion of Humboldt view of language, culture and society in the so-called linguistic relativity hypothesis. But quite to the contrary of Humboldt's emphasis on language as communicative process, both semantic field analysis and the linguistic relativity hypothesis had a static, correlational outlook.

The situation changed strikingly in the relatively short time of one academic career, from my student days to this day. As a living witness to this change I may be allowed to describe it in a short piece of personal retrospection. Looking backward, I feel justified in saying that the change was profound; with some slight exaggeration one might call what happened a paradigm shift. I can testify to the fact that there is a world of difference between what was taken for granted in my student days in linguistics and in sociology as well as social psychology, on the one hand, and the assumptions on which we rely in the study of social interaction and communicative processes today. In the late forties, when, I began studying comparative linguistics in Europe, the dominant approach was either philological in the old sense or what appeared as abstract structuralism to an impatient student who was in vain looking for *la parole* in the study of *la langue*. Arriving in the United States of America in the early fifties I switched to sociology<sup>3</sup>. As a student of Alfred Scultz I was spared indoctrination in structural functionalism. Structural functionalism, as the dominant approach to society, and structuralism and, slightly later, generative grammar as the dominant approaches to language, seemed both static and abstract, remote from the realities of social life and communication. To use Humboldt's own terms, they seemed almost exclusively concerned with the *εργον*, rather than the *ερεργεια* of language and social life. Given the nature of reality they studied, I thought that the two disciplines should be closely connected, in fact, it seemed that they existed in separate universes. Although I retained a strong interest in language and its uses and functions in human social life after becoming a sociologist, I was struck by the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> The introduction to his study of the Kawi language *On the difference of the human construction of language and its influence on the mental development of the human race* was published posthumously in 1836. Humboldt, although no dwarf, was standing on the shoulders of giants, Vico, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Hamann, Herder.

<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, given the social psychological setting of this lecture I may add that my minor field was social psychology and that I too courses with Solomon Asch and Mary Henle.

sociology and even what went by the label of a sociology of language was linguistically naïve to the point of ignorance. At the same time the notions of social interaction and social structure in linguistics, even in the budding sub-discipline of pragmatics, were, to put it mildly, of a modest home-grown variety. Half a century ago, this state of affairs was taken for granted by many, if not most practitioners in the two disciplines.

I am not a historian of science and, in any case, it is not my purpose to detail the changes in the two fields and the concurrent rapprochement between certain not entirely negligible parts of the disciplines involved. Nonetheless, I should like to point to the main sources of the change, the shift to what has been variously called the communicative paradigm<sup>4</sup>. I am not quite sure which developments, e.g., in linguistic pragmatics contributed most to the paradigmatic change in the relationship of language theory and social theory. I am rather doubtful that speech act theory, much quoted as it was, significantly influenced research. I am less doubtful about Halliday's so-called functional linguistics. Grice, and others in linguistics proper, e.g., Per Linell, as well as some social psychologists with close connection to language theory, e.g., those who worked in the Reimer's Foundation Dynamics of Dialogue Study Group, played an important role.

Another, somewhat older, source of this change, had a direct connection to Humboldt. Interestingly enough, Humboldt's thought had not been neglected in Russia as much as elsewhere. Potebnja kept alive interest in Humboldt's thought in the second half of the nineteenth century<sup>5</sup>. He was the connecting link between Humboldt and the Russian linguists and literary scholars, e.g., Jakobson and especially Bakhtin. The "discovery" of Volosinov-Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogue and genre in the West certainly contributed to the change in the prevailing orthodoxies and to the propagation of a dialogical approach to language and social life.

In France, first in the work of Lévi-Strauss and then in that of Pierre Bourdieu, the seeds sown in the Durkheim-Meillet connection bore belated fruit. Another early source of the change in the United States of America was the programme of an ethnography of communication proposed about forty years ago by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes. About the same time the thought and teaching of Alfred Schutz fed two other sources that directly and indirectly helped to establish a communicative paradigm in social theory. One was ethnomethodology and its offspring, conversational analysis, and the other was what some people call the "new" sociology of knowledge with one of its offspring, communicative genre theory.

What, then, are the assumptions which I think we take for granted in our investigations to such an extent that they appear trivial if articulated now and which would have met with puzzlement or rejection then?

## **2. Ontological and epistemological assumptions and methodological consequences**

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<sup>4</sup> My review of the sociology of language for the *Handbuch der empirischen Sozialforschung* edited by René König contains a relatively detailed account. The revised version of 1979 took note of many more changes in theory and research than my contribution to the first edition in 1969. Yet, while I reviewed the work of Gumperz and Hymes, Goffman, Garfinkel, Sacks, Schegloff and others, Bakhtin and Volosinov, although not Vygotsky, were still missed by me even then.

<sup>5</sup> *Misl I jazyk*, 1868???

Today as then it remains obvious that the empirical sciences cannot be ontologically neutral. In order to have something to investigate, they must accept in general principle the claim of the world, as it presents itself to human experience, that it is real, with all due scepticism as to details. Human experience is fallible, details that present themselves as facts may be illusory, but the basic claim of the world that it is there cannot be ignored. Trying to account for the fallibility of human experience makes sense only if one accepts that claim. There can be no change in the basic realism of the empirical sciences, which has changed are the assumptions about the reality of the social world.

According to the position I am describing, the social sciences investigate a world of human affairs that is not simply given to observation and measurement. These sciences seek to describe and explain a world whose objectivity is not accomplished by an inter-subjective agreement of a community of investigators about brute natural facts. It is accomplished by the inter-subjective agreement of a community of investigators about the inter-subjective accomplishments of the entire human community, in an endless chain of generations. Human societies are naturally artificial forms of life, to use a term introduced by the biologist and anthropological philosopher Plessner<sup>6</sup>. The traditions of life by which human societies are organized are the cumulative result of long chains of interaction.

This means that the subject matter of the social sciences is historical in a special sense. The universe, the earth, the living species all have a history which is independent of human activities. The human social world is historical in an additional sense. As a small part of life on earth – that is itself an infinitesimal part of the cosmos – the human species emerged in evolution. Yet the human social worlds are not directly evolutionary products. They are the result of continuous human interaction and the tangible as well as intangible consequences of interaction. The consequences are bridges, canals, cities, mines. But the consequences are also traditions, historical communicative systems and institutional structures; if the holy spirit is the creator of *logos*, language, then it does so by means of human interaction. Traditions, historical communicative systems and institutional structures may appear less tangible than buildings and artefacts but they are equally real. They do not come into being in a metaphysical act of *autopoiesis*; they are built up in human interaction just as are buildings and artefacts.

To formulate the obvious: social reality presupposes intentional activities. Social worlds are constructed, maintained, transmitted, transformed and, perhaps, destroyed in social interactions that are meaningful to those who engage in them. They are meaningful to them when they lead to results that they intended to achieve, and they are meaningful in another, often painful sense, when the consequences of interaction differ from those that were originally anticipated. Action is intrinsically meaningful, no matter whether the bridges that were built to endure, endure in fact or collapse, whether the marriages that were meant to last, last or fail.

The social sciences reconstruct as knowledge about social reality what was already constructed as social reality independently of science. What is reconstructed are small parts as well as larger wholes, short as well as long stretches of a historical human social world.

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<sup>6</sup> Plessner, Helmuth, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch, Einführung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, Berlin, 1928 and *Conditio Humana*, Pfullingen, 1964.

Much of that was sensed and anticipated by a long line of historians and philosophers, from Thucydides to Vico, from Montaigne and Montesquieu to the moral philosophers, to Adam Smith and Marx. Nonetheless, a systematic formulation of the position whose assumptions I am describing had to wait until the twentieth century. Max Weber and, after him, Alfred Schutz took up the main epistemological and methodological issues connected with this position. However, their efforts to clarify the presuppositions of the social sciences were largely misunderstood or ignored in the so-called mainstream of the social sciences and in the philosophy of science well into the second half of the last century.

To be sure, even fifty years ago there was hardly anybody left either in the physical or the social sciences who believed in the God-given purity of facts. Today it is even less likely that anyone would maintain that “data” are simply given. The insight that “data” are “facta”, that they are communicative constructs, is generally accepted, although there is no generally agreed precise answer either to the ontological question from what or the epistemological question precisely how the data are constructed. Given the peculiar nature of social reality, it is hardly surprising that controversies about the way these questions should be answered, were particularly acute in the social sciences. Through much of the twentieth century, many philosophers and practitioners of social science anachronistically continued to be mesmerized by the simplistic and anachronistic nineteenth century notions of physical science. In the social sciences the realistic position that “data” are communicative constructs of the investigators based upon direct or indirect, e.g., instrumentally mediated observation, depends upon how “observation” is understood. If it is thought that what is observed is naturalistically defined behaviour, we are back with the endless difficulties, indeed prevarications of behaviourism. These can be avoided if the object of observation is defined as social interaction and its historical results. It is precisely this view and its corollary, that the “data” of social sciences are communicative constructs of what are already interactional, most often communicative constructs, before they become “data”, that had a difficult time in gaining wider acceptance.

Even today there may be controversies on methodological details. However, I take it that there is basic agreement on what kind of answer to the question how and from what “data” are constructed is acceptable. The answer must build upon the simple presupposition that social realities are the result of human praxis over the course of generations. The data of the social sciences – as those of the “classical” humanities – are elements of such realities. How they are to be treated as scientific data is thereby strongly indicated. Because they were constructed in meaningful social actions in a historical social world, they are to be reconstructed as data in a way which preserves rather than destroys their essential meaningfulness and historicity.

Certainly, not all human *praxis* consists of communicative interaction in the usual sense of the word. Animals are hunted, fields are tilled, shelters are built, children are nurtured, enemies are fought. Yet, as these simple examples show, even what is not primarily communicative interaction is usually facilitated and often accompanied by it, and sometimes, as in the case of nurturing, may be the beginning of it. The human social world is mainly constructed in communicative interaction and all of the world view that motivates and guides interaction is constructed in communicative processes. The ontological presupposition of the social sciences is that human reality is historically built

up in social interaction. The epistemological corollary is that human reality is primarily constructed communicatively.

Obviously, the reconstructions of social realities in the social sciences are by definition communicative just as are reconstructions on the primary level of everyday social discourse. On that level most societies, I should think, all societies, developed communicative forms, even full-blown genres, with the aid of which past experiences, events and actions are reconstructed. Such reconstructions feed the collective memory of families, social groups and classes, institutions and entire societies. On the secondary level, following different methodological rules, reconstructions produce social science data.

If all that seems obvious, even trivial today I should like to emphasize that it was anything but that a generation or two ago. As I said, the change went fairly deep. In addition to the reasons, which I just sketched, there was another reason to which I will briefly turn now, the growing awareness of a broad range of studies which documented the pervasiveness of communicative interaction in human life from its very beginning.

### **3. The pervasiveness of communicative interaction**

Many investigations showed that the earliest experiences of the infant are anything but passive. The child's relations to the people in its immediate environment soon begin to approximate reciprocal and essentially communicative, if still pre-linguistic interaction. Crying, the response of the mother, and the reaction to the response of the mother by the child, cuddling, mutual gaze etc. help the child become aware of reciprocity. With the recognition that certain gestures seem to elicit certain responses, knowledge of objective meanings begins to accumulate and the threshold to communicative interaction in the narrower sense is passed step by step. (Of course in a wider sense, all interaction is communicative because every action not only does something but also indicates something). The recollection or, more precisely, the sedimentation of the closeness of touch and smell, distance of sight and sound in these interactions helps the child to acquire a sense of having a body, of being an active being, not only of being a body, a mere receptacle of impressions<sup>7</sup>. The main point is that the child engages first in a conversation of gestures, then in genuine dialogue and that it tentatively becomes a person at the same time as it is made to feel responsible for its actions.

In adulthood, the larger portion of everyday life consists of interlocking social interactions most of which are communicative. They follow various projects, many of them of small significance taken by themselves, that are often part of larger plans for a career, a lasting relationship, an entire life. Projects and plans are selected and adapted from the repertoire of projects and plans available in a given society at a given time, available for socially defined categories of people.

Such repertoires consist of socially distributed "vocabularies and rhetorics of motives"<sup>8</sup>. The repertoires encapsulate entire traditions of guide-lines on how to conduct life. They

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<sup>7</sup> I don't intend to dwell on the pertinent early theories by J.H. Cooley, G.H. Mead and Alfred Schutz, and I assume that much of the body of the research by Mario von Cranach, Colin Trewarthen, Mary Rhinegold, Jerome Bruner and many others are known in general outline.

<sup>8</sup> C. Wright Mills terms, adapted by him from an earlier use by Kenneth Burke.

are of course not simply given. I already stated the general and basic assumptions that they, as all social realities, had been formed, were maintained and are being transmitted in communicative interaction. While not simply given, they are nonetheless “there” as part of what I may call a socio historical *a priori*. I use this term to refer to the sum total of the natural-artificial circumstances that define the starting point on a human organism’s way to become a human being and acquire in a social interaction a historically framed personal identity.

Children grow into different traditions, their actions are shaped by different institutions, they acquire different languages and with them different “vocabularies and rhetorics of motives”. Their talk and their silence is formed by different communicative repertoires and by different communicative genres. Just as institutions regulate only some social actions, so are communicative genres only part of the communicative repertoire of the members of a society. And just as there are areas of social life that are relatively free from obligatory institutional regulation, so are there relatively spontaneous communicative processes in any community. However, institutions are indicators of what are the socially most relevant problems of life in a particular society and genres point to its most relevant communicative problems.

The stabilization of communicative patterns and their fusion into distinct genres serves the same purpose as institutionalisation: *Entlastung*, i.e., liberation from the need to improvise when facing recurring communicative problems. How can different aspects of past events and actions, both of the *courte* and the *longue durée*, be best communicated for different purposes? How, when, and to whom? How can collective action be planned? How are successive generations to be introduced into notions of good and evil? These are three particularly important areas of communication, important for establishing and maintaining social order in a society and in the communities of life, of ideas and of emotions which form part of a society. Communicative genres will be associated with them in all societies.

#### **4. Methodology again**

If social reality is constructed in communicative interaction, and if it is pervasive in social life, our most reliable knowledge of that reality will come from reconstructions of these processes. However, an elementary difficulty with the analysis of communicative interaction, as of all social interaction, is the transformation of communicative processes into data susceptible of analysis<sup>9</sup>. This difficulty may explain why in the social sciences, data of a different kind were preferred. As against the fleeting processes of interaction and communication their quasi-objective products appear stable, thus permitting both unhurried and verifiable analysis. The methodological preference of the social sciences for art and artefacts, actuarial statistics and registers, documents and other “material” objects was based on the assumption that processes were beyond exact description and that the subjective components of what was ephemeral in the first place were not objectifiable. The methodological bias which arose from the technical difficulty in pinning down the processes of social interaction came to distort the theoretical view of human reality.

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<sup>9</sup> In the following I use some passages from my 1999 paper on the interpretation of dialogue. “Remarks on the Description and Interpretation of Dialogue” in: *International Sociology*, 14 (4) (1999), pp. 387-402

The last link in the chain of events that changed so much in the assumptions and practices in the study of society and language during my own life-time is represented by the scientific use of a technological innovation. The possibility of precise analysis of the processes in which all the various material and immaterial products of social interaction are produced depends on the possibility of “freezing” these processes for later, repeated inspection<sup>10</sup>.

Possibility became fact less than a hundred years ago. However, systematic social science use of the developments which permitted first auditory and then also visual recording of such processes began much later. The analysis of the products of social interaction, from food, clothing and tools, factories, churches, jails and cemeteries to legal codes, birth registries, music scores and literature certainly continues to be essential for an understanding of social reality. After all, they are what human communication and interactions is intended to produce. However, in the past decades, taking the new technologies for granted, we have been in an increasingly better position to direct our efforts to an analysis of the “production process” in relation to the “product” and in relation to the “consumption” of the “product”, i.e., to an analysis of interaction and dialogue both as part of social reality and as source of much of social reality.

It was the interplay of various theoretical and technological reasons and circumstances which produced the shift to the so-called communicative paradigm. A rather substantial change in social theory and sociological methodology.

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<sup>10</sup> <sup>10</sup> Cf. Bergmann, Jörg, “Flüchtigkeit und methodische Fixierung sozialer Wirklichkeit. Aufzeichnungen als Daten der interpretativen Soziologie”, in W. Bonß and H. Hartmann, (eds.), *Entzauberte Wissenschaft. Zur Relativität and Geltung sozialer Forschung*, Soziale Welt. spec.vol.3, 1985, pp.299-320.