Department of Political Science

Course on Sociology of Communication

PROCESSES AND PATHOLOGIES

OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an era in which technology is rapidly transforming communicative styles. On the one hand, the new media enable us to communicate with a lot of people with no regard for spatial distance, but on the other hand, they limit all the wealth and possibilities offered by interpersonal communication. This work aims to develop the latter theme, contributing to reflection and research on this topic.

Interpersonal communication is a *conditio sine qua non* of human life and of the social system. Obviously, from the very onset of our existence, each of us is involved in a complex process of acquisition of the communication's rules, but we are only aware of these rules in a minimum measure. We are instinctively and culturally ready to tap into the signs that come to us from those similar to us and from the environment. However, we tend to selectively see and hear only what is convenient for us to see and hear. As Pease [2004] points out, we believe that we are enthusiastic about the points of a political programme or the themes of a debate, but in actual fact, the contents expressed in verbal language constitute a mere 7% of the overall communicative flow.

This thesis proposes an analysis of *face to face* communication, with a particular focus on the effects that it produces over human behaviour. The aim is to raise awareness among readers of the use that they themselves make of verbal and non-verbal communication, to make their communication more effective and persuasive. The perception that we have of ourselves and of the outside world depends on the interpersonal relations we have with other people. The main cultural practices qualifying an individual's existence, all are structured on the basis of communicative processes.

In Part I we will examine the concept of communication, focusing on a theoretical overview; attention will be focused on its constitutional elements and the axioms that regulate its operational processes.

Part II explains why a face to face relationship can assume the form of a strategic game and presents a brief review of studies on verbal and non-verbal communication.

In Part III we propose four applicative settings for interpersonal communication: persuasive communication, miscommunication, pathological communication and communication in total institutions. We believe that examining practical cases in which the aims of communication seem to fail is a valid method for pushing the theory to its limit.

Part I: <u>VIEWS ON COMMUNICATION</u>

Chapter 1: *Towards a definition of communication*

Each of us is a communicating being, just as we are thinking, emotive and social beings. Given that communication is a constitutive dimension of each of us, we cannot choose whether or not to be communicative, but only how to communicate. This assumption was formulated scientifically by the Palo Alto school, through the meta-communicational axiom "it is impossible not to communicate" [Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1967]. Even if we refuse to communicate verbally, closing ourselves off into muteness, we cannot fail to have some kind of behaviour, because our body occupies a space, and inevitably behaves in some way.

If we look into the etymology of the word "communication" we get back to the Latin *communis* ("common", "shared"), which can be broken up into *cum-munis* ("obligation", but also "gift"). At a first glance, communication therefore appears to be "the word in between", an act in which participants share duties and honours. The general definition of communication provided by Paccagnella [2004, p. 27] is compliant with this dialogical perspective: "process of collective construction and sharing of meaning according to the culture of reference, equipped with different levels of formalisation, awareness and intentionality".

Nevertheless, the studies carried out by the Palo Alto School, which evolved into the mathematical theory of information, have considered communication specifically to be a continuous flow of *stimulus-reaction-reinforcement*, that implicates a negotiation process between the broadcaster and the addressee: the broadcaster adapts the transmission on the basis of the feedback received from the addressee during the course of the interaction. Furthermore, every message contains an explicit level of content, the "news", and a level of "relation", which specifies the manner in which that message should be understood and the acknowledged relationships between the participants in the interaction.

Chapter 2: *Communicative competence, intentionality and inference*

The notion of *communicative competence*, understood as "the set of pre-conditions, knowledge and rules that make it possible for each individual to communicate" [Zuanelli

Sonino, 1981], is owing mostly to socio-linguistics, which studies the manners in which a member of a linguistic community manages to produce and understand the messages that enable him to interact with other speakers. In reality, the term *"competence"*, understood to mean exclusively linguistic and grammatical ability, had already been used by Chomsky in his *"Aspects of the theory of syntax"* [1965] in contrast with *"performance"*, indicating both the putting into practice of competence and the set of intervening factors in the practical act of language, such as attention, memory and self-perception. Chomsky puts *competence* in a pre-eminent position in comparing it to *performance*: he believes in fact that the very minimum structure of the sentence (*subject/verb/object*) is present in all languages and lies at the basis of all possible meaningful enunciations, that are so "complete" that they can be understood even without the further use of *performance*. Hymes [1972] notes how Chomsky seems to fail to notice the fact that *competence* is necessary but not sufficient in human relations: in fact, a person having a merely linguistic competence "would be aware of grammatical rules, but would be unaware of when to speak and when to remain in silence, which linguistic options to use on the basis of the context, which conventions accompany the word, etc…". Nowadays, *performance* is recognised the same importance as *competence*. Also, as far as the acquisition of communicative competence is concerned, Chomskian nativism also appears to have been surpassed: recent studies show how, when learning a language, children are not guided by an implicit knowledge of basic grammatical rules, but rather, language is born and develops during the course of interaction between parents and the environment.

The *communicative intention* is the "zip between an individual's mental contents and his willingness to make them known to another" [Anolli, 2012]. When beginning a form of interaction, the broadcasting individual has an overall intention to communicate something to an addressee in such a way as to be understood. The intention is satisfied only if it produces the sequence of actions that it intended to reach in the addressee. Commenting on this process, Grice [1975] introduces a distinction between "what is said" (*informative intention*; expressing a certain content to the addressee), and "what should be understood" (*communicative intention*; understanding how that content should be decoded by the addressee). If the aim of the speaker is to modify the addressee's mental environment, codifying the message in a given code, the receiver's duty is to recognise and reconstruct the broadcaster's intention. A cooperative game of intentional reciprocity therefore gets

underway. The strength of the intention is often directly proportional to the importance of the information sent, the relevance of the interlocutor, and the nature of the context.

It is in our nature as men, to adopt that *teleological behaviour* according to which we are inclined to almost automatically attribute an intention to other people's behaviour, foresee their moves and anticipate their actions. From the point of view of communication, writes Anolli, this implicates an "asymmetrical direction of communicative responsibility where the broadcaster is the source, while the addressee's objective is to recognise the intention in the most reliable manner possible". Nevertheless, the addressee cannot read the interlocutor's mind, and he must proceed by *inference*. From that closely-knit set of communicative clues that he believes most relevant, the receiver will draw out the most plausible intentions; the assignment of intentions will thus depend on an interpretational discretional choice. The main types of logical inference are deduction (from general to particular), induction (from particular to general) and abduction (from effects to causes).

PART II: <u>INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION</u>

Chapter 1: *Communication, interaction and face to face interaction*

By **communication** here we mean "an interaction between two or more individuals, having a certain degree of awareness and intentionality" [Anolli, 2012]

Interaction is "any contact that comes about between two or more individuals, even involuntarily, that is capable of changing the pre-existent state of things between them" [ibidem]. An email sent to the wrong address or a person accidentally brushed against in the lift are therefore two cases of interaction: the second one however, has an extra piece of "data" with respect to the first, in the sense that there is the sharing of a physical space between the participants, and this may be considered a form of *face to face interaction*. Face to face interaction is the most basic and most frequent method of interaction on a daily basis between individuals; it is what made the birth of language and primitive human communities come about in remote times.

Through their actions, notes Goffman [1969], individuals "transude expressions", that is, they give potential external interlocutors an insight into something about themselves. These expressions, compared with the physical presence of the individual who granted them through direct observation, constitute *expressed information*. Even a form of simple face to face interaction that is never transformed into a form of interpersonal communication can

profoundly inform someone, for example, on sex, age, social class, work, intentions. But the more it is the natural tendency of an observer to gather information on those who are around him, the more the observed party has an interest in controlling and directing the information being dispensed, so as to gain advantage from the relationship. And so the result of the opposing interests of the two participants (to learn something from an *informer* and to comply with or mislead the observer's *assessments*) will be the enactment of *expression games*. Goffman refers to face to face interactions, which include elements for the calculation of probability and utility, as *strategic interactions*.

Chapter 2: *Two levels of communication: verbal and non-verbal*

Verbal communication (VC) is a "form of behaviour that consists of the production of institutionalised sounds organised according to culturally defined models" [Mahl and Schulze, 1964]. Language represents the code through which messages to be exchanged are produced, in a completely *arbitrary* manner, syllables and letters are linked together with abstract concepts and concrete objects. In an extremely analytical manner, language *denotes*, enabling the operation of even minimum semantic distinctions.

Non verbal communication (NVC) is "an elaborated code that is not written anywhere, but understood by everyone" [Sapir, 1921]. It goes beyond words and understands a heterogeneous series of behaviours, capable of transmitting meanings: tone, style and rhythm of the spoken words, posture, gestures, facial expressions, use of space, use of tempo. Non-verbal language has an essentially *connotative* function (that is, it expresses emotions and points of view on the world, rather than describing the world in itself) and it is *motivated* with respect to its real referent (think of iconic gestures for example). According to Hall [1959] non-verbal communication is the place where the "cultural unconscious" [ibidem] is manifested; this is learnt by imitation and gives forms to our values through actions. In this sense, non-verbal communication is more immediate, more sincere, more spontaneous and therefore more reliable than verbal communication, which is merely one of its overtones.

Chapter 3: *The channels of non-verbal communication*

The *voice* transmits a very widespread meaning that is much more ample than that which is intrinsic to words themselves. In the act of saying a word, in fact, *super-segmental* aspects

that belong to the NVC sphere are added to the linguistic elements (*segmental*). Specifically speaking, *non-verbal vocal components* are:

- the individual's *extra-linguistic*, organic characteristics (given by the anatomical configuration and the dimensions of the phonatory apparatus) and phonetic characteristics (associated with pronunciation, accent);
- *paralinguistic* characteristics, the set of "transitory acoustic properties that accompany pronunciation and vary from situation to situation" [Anolli, 2012]

The following are part of the paralinguistic:

- the harsh or acute *tone*, given by the fundamental frequency (F°) of the voice;
- the *intensity*, which consists of the volume of the voice;
- the *tempo*, that is, the rhythm of speech and pauses. The average duration of each speaking turn, silences, articulation speed, reflexes and vocal characterisers (laughing, crying) depend on this.

The characteristics of non-verbal vocal components are influenced by b*iological factors*, such as sex and age, *social factors, psychological factors and personality factors*.

The ***face*** is the part of the body that mostly catalyses the attention of interlocutors and therefore that which transmits information most, from the neo-natal phase. Ekman [1972] writes that emotive expressions appear on the face both when we are alone and when we are in the presence of others, such as the conditioned reflex of an interior state; furthermore, the mimic equivalents of the six base-emotions (joy, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise) are present in all cultures and recognised by everyone in a reliable manner.

"One cannot take through the eye without at the same time giving", wrote Simmel [1908, p. 550-551] regarding the reciprocity of ***eye contact***. The socket of the human eye has evolved in such a manner as to show the sclera, thus enabling us to always identify the direction of the gaze: it is in fact a visual exchange that makes interpersonal communication possible. The average duration of the gaze is 3 seconds; more prolonged eye contact is reserved for close friends and family members or cases of seduction, persistent staring by a stranger is often felt to be intrusive.

Gestures are "co-ordinated and circumscribed actions, aimed at generating meaning and addressed to an interlocutor, in order to attain an aim" [Anolli, 2002].

Ekman and Frieser [1969], concentrating in particular on the expressiveness of the hands, identified:

- *illustrative gestures:* they visually illustrate what we are saying (for example the outline of hills, the waves on the sea, the top of a mountain…)
- *symbolic gestures:* made intentionally, they have a specific meaning that cannot be translated into words (to point, to wave your hand as a way of saluting someone…). The Italian repertoire is very rich with symbolic gestures.
- *gestures that indicate an emotional state:* such as to rejoice as a sign of victory or shake one's fist as a sign of anger.
- *regulatory gestures*: aimed at managing speaking turns, or used to highlight words or sentences, to start to speak (for example percussive gestures).

As far as **territoriality** is concerned, that is, the management of space, Hall [1966] has described various distances in interpersonal communication:

- *public distance* (over 4 metres): maintained in official situations, for example at a conference or business meeting;

- *social distance* (between 1 and 4 metres): maintained in places and situations that the individual knows and in which he or she feels at ease, for example, in his or her own home, office or at a club with friends;

- *personal distance* (from 0.5 to 1 metre): this is the person's spatial bubble, in which one can perceive their smell, and only family members and friends are allowed into this space;

- *intimate distance* (less than 0.5 m): this is the distance for an embrace; you can touch one another, feel the intensity of emotions and speak in someone's ear. This distance is kept with partners and close friends.

PART III: <u>APPLICATIONS: CONSTRUCTIONS OF REALITY</u>

Chapter 1: *Persuasive communication*

Persuasive communication is that type of interpersonal communication aimed at generating a process of influence; its very efficiency is measured in terms of influence, given that by definition it is "communication that convinces the addressees to change assessments and courses of action in conditions of freedom" [Anolli, 2012]

Influence implicates forms of *social pressure* as regards the individual, who is encouraged to maintain beliefs and behaviours in line with those of the group; asymmetrical relationship forms are settings in which an individual or group, by virtue of the amount of resources they have, acquire greater *power to control* the convictions of an individual, who is put into conditions of subordination with respect to them [Anolli and Ugazio, 1984]. If we recognise a person's ability to orientate our opinions and actions, for us, that person becomes a *cognitive authority*: we often compare ourselves to them, believing them to be worthy of our esteem, we have interests in common, we believe that their experience and competence justify a social and communicative status that is superior to our own. Examples of cognitive authority are parents, teachers, scientists, local politicians and various professionals, as far as their specific areas are concerned: those who are considered cognitive authorities by several people have networks of interpersonal relations that are richer and more ample, not unlike the opinion leaders identified by Katz and Lazarfield [1955] within the framework of media enjoyment, they will end up having more influencing power within the group. If on the other hand, a certain number of individuals influence our choices, and polarise around certain issues, generating a group within a social group, we can talk about *majority or minority influence* (in relation to the numerical entity and the persuasive strength of such a group).

Chapter 2: *Miscommunication*

Miscommunication "is saying something for something else. It is saying something to someone so as to enable another person to understand. It is "to say not to say" [Anolli, 2012]. What we are interested in here is that, with respect to standard communication, miscommunication is characterised by *intentional opacity*: the speaker's communicative intention is different to the intention expressed, and it is up to the interlocutor to choose which of the two intentional levels to trust.

Irony is a form of miscommunication in which the words are *pretend*. The pretence is the evident negation of what appears: the aim of the ironist is not to trick people by saying something *false*, he allows himself to be unmasked, wanting his message to be clear in its references to events, without being evident. Irony is therefore configured in fact as an *antiphrasis*: a discrepancy is created between the linguistic level and the relational level so the meaning of the phrase is the logical negation of the literal interpretation [Grice, 1975].

Seduction is a strategic and intentional sequence of moves, the aim of which is to attract another person so as to reach an intimate relationship with them [Anolli, 2012]. The seducer is he who knows how to expose himself in the right manner on the relationship stage, taking on the role of protagonist and taking advantage of his image in the best possible manner. In fact, seduction is an intermediate communicative space between the real, the false and the pretend: desire and feelings are not revealed openly, the other person is left the freedom to continue the game in a growing climax of attachment and intimacy.

Lastly, ***lies*** consist of three conditions that come about at the same time:

- the *falseness* of the contents of what is said;

- the *awareness* of such falsity;

- the *intention to trick* the addressee in such a way as to make them believe something false regarding the state of things or to prevent them from coming to know the truth [Anolli, 2003].

Therefore, the aim of the person who is lying is unequivocally to trick the addressee; nevertheless, to make himself believable, the liar must show the addressee that he or she believes in what he or she said as it is true. For this reason, deceptive communication, especially in certain occasions, requires a relevant use of cognitive resources and able management, both on verbal and non-verbal levels.

Chapter 3: *Pathological communication*

Interpersonal communication inevitably touches the sphere of personal identity and the self-perception of communicating individuals. And so psychological suffering is strictly related to what others, harming our image of ourselves, have communicated to us in words, gestures or facts; in turn the psychic condition determines the means and manners through which the ill person communicates with the world. *Pathological communication* studies the inter-dependency between communicative disturbances (that is the main forms of miscommunication) and psycho-pathological disturbances; the fact that the manners of communicating constitute fundamental factors for the genesis and maintenance of mental disturbances is now recognised by sociologists and clinical psychologists [Goffman, 1961; Watzlawick et al., 1967; Bateson, 1972; Anolli, 2004].

Schizophrenia is a psychiatric illness characterised by a significant disturbance to the personality, that affects thoughts, feelings and social relations. From a communicative point of view, the schizophrenic is characterised by a contradictory, fragmentary style, with

grammatical mistakes and stuffed with neologisms. The foreseeable outcome is incomprehensibility. This incomprehensibility is sought out by the patient because it gives them the presumption of remaining outside the communicative exchange. In fact, the schizophrenic does not accept the commitment and responsibility deriving from the communicative exchange, because their previous experience teaches them that trusting to take on a role in a conversation will lead them to once again expose that image of themselves that was never accepted by others. And so they do not want to communicate. And although they do not want to communicate, nevertheless it is their very human nature that "forces them" and so they communicate their unwillingness to communicate all the same through gestures and behaviour. Trapped in this paradox, they use a cryptic language that leaves the listener the choice between many possible meanings [Watzlawick et al., 1967]. Another typical characteristic of schizophrenic language is *conversational disqualification*, that is manifested through answers that are incoherent with the questions asked. Conversational disqualification has an effect of disconfirmation, whereby the speaker fails to notice the existence of the interlocutor and only accepts the content level, and not the relational one, in a conversation. Furthermore, for decades in psychiatry it was believed that schizophrenia, psychosis and depression were partially caused by the continuous exposure of patients to pragmatic paradoxes (unsustainable injunctions that must be disobeyed in order to be obeyed, thus paralysing action, such as "Be spontaneous"! for example) which were posed to them within the family circle. The practise of reproducing such paradoxes for therapeutic purposes, which was very much in vogue in the 1960's appears to have been surpassed today.

Chapter 4: *Communication in total institutions*

According to Goffman, face to face interaction is that social space in which identity is built, but it is also the place where it may be destroyed. If conventional rules for interaction are respected in daily life *(rituals)* enabling individuals to protect themselves from attacks from others, there is a type of setting in which these rituals are no longer valid: total institutions: The total institution invalidates and destroys the rituals and values that are valid in the outside world and replaces them with routines and hierarchies that are only valid within it. By formalising and stiffening interaction, Goffman sustains, we obtain the degradation and depersonalisation of the individual: for the organisation, cancelling out specificities is the most effective means by which to reach the pre-established aims, be they of a therapeutic,

scientific or moral nature. Goffman directly observes the reality of total institutions in general, and in particular those in psychiatric hospitals; the aim, which coincides with our objective in this point of our treatment of this subject, is to provide a sociological description of the practices of control and dehumanisation implemented in the main total institutions, on the one hand, and the strategies of strenuous resistance for the protection of identity brought about by those interned, on the other.

A *total institution* is the "place of residence and work of groups of people who, cut out of society for a lengthy period of time, find themselves sharing a common situation, spending part of their life in a close and formally administered regime" [Goffman, 1961, p. 29]. The incorporating character is such that it prevents members from freely being able to exit it and experience exchanges with the outside world: institutions created to protect non-dangerous people considered to be incapable (orphans, blind people, the elderly…), people considered to be incapable who, despite themselves are considered to be a danger for the community (psychiatric hospitals and sanatoriums), institutes that protect society from those who are an intentional danger for it (prisons, prison camps), institutions with a severe hierarchy, assigned a particular social function (military barracks, colleges…), religious institutions which, for the purposes of their own mission, are isolated from the rest of the world (monasteries, convents…).

Upon entering the total institution, the *newcomer* is coming from a series of experiences that have built up his or her self-image and he or she is aware of a number of manners in which to resist disqualification attempts regarding his or her identity. The aim of the institution is to gradually demolish that conception of self, to build another one that is compatible with the aims of the organisation. The moral career of the newcomer differs according to whether the "recruitment" is voluntary, semi-voluntary or compulsory. In the event of voluntary entry to the total institution (into the barracks or convent), a gradual distancing from civil society has already come about prior to entry; the ideological disposition or religious faith will make it easier for the initiate to comply with the aims of the organisation, where it will be sufficient to direct new members towards coherent behavioural models and often, to choose the more suitable candidates. The detainee and the psychiatric patient on the other hand enter the total institution against their will, subject to the indication of the doctors who have carried out the first diagnosis or further to a trial that has proven their guilt. Both, at the time of entering the total institution, suffer the *loss of many citizenship rights*. Furthermore, the experience of prison or in a psychiatric hospital

will be an irremovable element of social prejudice when they come out. The second step towards the loss of self consists of *standardised admission procedures*: "taking of photographs, assignment of a number, handing over their clothes to the organisation and getting new clothes the same as those of the others, cutting their hair, assignment of quarters" [ibidem]. A *system of punishments and privileges* is set up, through which the obtainment of even minimum favours becomes the centre of the inmate's attentions, he thinks about how to obtain them all day long. The result of this mechanism is "that we obtain collaboration from people who have all the reasons in the world not to collaborate" [Goffman, 1969]. The prisoner and mentally ill person are then *stripped of their personal belongings*. The few objects allowed are never safe from possible theft, and they are therefore hidden in the corners of the room, under beds, or constantly worn on their person. Another form of mortification is *contaminating exposure*: if forced sexual submission is commonplace in prisons, privacy doesn't exist in psychiatric hospitals. They may be forced to sleep in collective dormitories, to use dirty toilets, to take medicine against their will. The interned person loses their self-determination and the autonomy that is typical of adults.

To adapt to daily life in the total institution, the prisoner adopts stratagems to safeguard himself such as *withdrawal from the situation* (muteness and regression), *removal mechanisms*, *disturbing actions* (not serious acts of insubordination), *fraternisation* with companions and *secondary adaptation* (which solves most of the problems they are forced to put up with).

Mortification and restriction of self imply such a condition of stress and unease that in his essay *"On being sane in insane places"* [in Watzalwick, edited by, 1981], provocatively proposed the hypothesis that the mental patient is not in this condition regardless, but he becomes so the moment he is imprisoned in the psychiatric hospital and subjected to inhumane treatments in use during the years in which he was writing.

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