Between etymology and metaphor: the meanings and significations of communication and communicology
(Working paper: any assertion in this text is open to critical discussion and refutation)

Paul Bouissac (University of Toronto, Victoria College)

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is first to explore from a comparative perspective the etymology and history of the term "communication" and its equivalents in a variety of linguistic families in order to assess the horizon of consciousness in which its semantic is grounded. The second purpose of this paper is to review some of the metaphors and models which have been (or could be) used to understand our understanding of communication as a phenomenological notion.

There is indeed no escape from the binds of phenomenology but these binds can be made conscious through a reflexive process on the language we use toward this goal. Even the most counter-intuitive truths have to appear in consciousness to become functional parts of our explicit cognition and impact our life world. What can be debated is how much we can rely on our direct perception and awareness to guide our thoughts and actions, and to which extent we can protect ourselves from wishful thinking and delusions. There are countless examples of theories whose inner consistency caused them to be considered self-evident to large populations but which drove these populations to extinctions. The Cartesian *cogito* appears irrefutable only because it accepts a priori the very metaphysics it claims to ignore as a heuristic move. Dismissing the possibility of an evil power which would create in us the illusion of irrefutable evidence is actually an arbitrary epistemological decision. Numerous other issues have been raised within and without the phenomenological movement which has, in the meantime, inspired many fertile research studies beyond philosophy. Communicology is a relatively recent endeavor to recast the semiotic project in phenomenological terms and to emancipate it from the constraints of positivist epistemology which impacted its institutional development during the 20th century. The fundamental purpose of this paper is not to directly address fundamental issues but to explore in the philological mode the linguistic and discursive margins, so to speak, of communicology.

2. Questions of etymologies

We cannot express our states of consciousness without words. Meaning must be articulated to manifest itself to our conscience. Inner speech itself, often called thought, is propositional. Whatever effort we may make toward apprehending the true essences of the objects toward which we "intend", these essences necessarily appear through the veil of a language. Words are not transparent by themselves. They mean by virtue of their mutual relationships with other words at the moment when they are used and they signify by virtue of their articulation to a context which is present in the joint consciousness of their users, be it actual or virtual. Naturally, meaning and signification are abstractions since there is no instance of one occurring without the other. By their very nature, words carry with them a thick semantic history because their positions in a system as well as their contexts of uses have constantly changed over so long a period of time that nobody

can know anything about the time when this historical process began. However, in as much as literate cultures provide us with a written record we can trace back the history of the meaning and signification of the words we use. This can help us define what exactly we intend to mean when we use these words by specifying both the semantic system and the formal context of our horizon of consciousness. It may seem that the only way to achieve this is to select among the indefinite number of semiotic configurations those which best approximate our intention at the moment of utterance. But this approach presupposes that intention to express a thought is temporally distinct from the selection of its expression and, as such, relies on an instrumental model of communication which is questionable as it endows thoughts with an ontology that transcends language. This makes the focus on language all the more crucial to an understanding of the phenomenology of communication.

The previous forms of words, their etymology, provide access to their history, a history which is also necessarily the history of their contexts. But as we will see, there is no absolute point of origin in etymology. Every single state in the past refers to another state in a previous past. It is an arbitrary gesture to identify as the origin of an English word a Latin or an Old German word which can be found in the linguistic record. At most, these two words can be identified as two points on a continuum whose point of origin and destination are absolutely unknown, and probably unknowable. They provide a merely contingent lexical knowledge but they are nevertheless informative windows on moments of the conceptual flux they have articulated as long as we can figure out their respective contexts of use. This is why it is only to a very limited extent that the etymology of a term can help define the meaning of a word. However, it may reveal a broader cognitive area than a dictionary definition and, more importantly, it can explain why a word can have several meanings which depend on their contexts of use to such an extent that they appear to be different words (homonyms). Etymological explorations thus can be a way to form comprehensive representations of virtual semantic sets historically associated with lexical cognates.

It could be claimed, though, that when neologisms are created in order to determine a concept that cannot be contaminated by the history of existing words, these new words are immune to the vagaries of historical variations. They are absolute semiotic beginnings. But in fact most neologisms are hybrid coinages which, in the western philosophical and scientific traditions, borrow their material from the lexicon of ancient Greek and Latin. Thick semantic layers stick to them, and they soon become part of an evolving language upon which their users have no control. The same is true of common words which are redefined for the purpose of scientific or logical clarity. They quickly drown in the maelstrom of natural language and its constant recycling of metaphors.

"Communicology" is a hybrid neologism coined by adding the approximate rendering in modern English of the Greek *logos* to a Latin radical, *communico-* which can be assumed to be a shortening of modern English *communication* > *communic-* with the vowel *-o-* as a transitional sound as in "psych-o-logy", "phenomen-o-logy", and "astr-o-logy". The Greek term *logos* has a complex history with competing meanings. As a nominal form derived from the verb *lego* (so speak, to say), it can be understood to refer to speech, discourse, argument, and, consequently, reasoning. Hence the adjective *logicos* and its English avatar: "logic". In contemporary English, "-logy" is used as a suffix which is broadly equivalent to "science of"- but is also used more casually as a

marker to elevate the intellectual status of any endeavor which claims to deliver some truths such as "reflex-o-logy", "theatr-o-logy", or "scient-o-logy".

"Communication", of course, is one of the most common words in contemporary English. But, at least by its form, it is a Latin word which has survived with phonetic and graphic variants in the romance languages from which it was adopted by English and later spread worldwide as a tool and symptom of globalization.   Its significations in context are always clear, at least superficially. It's meaning, however, is problematic not only regarding its synchronic position in the semantic structure but also with respect to its pragmatics. If the diachronic dimension is added to its understanding, the legacy of its etymology transforms it into a conceptual quagmire. As we have pointed out above, specifying the meaning of a word by referring to its etymology is indeed a fallacy because all words, including those which are identified as the etymons have themselves an etymology, and so on *ad infinitum*. Philologists agree that "communication" results from the adjunction of *kom- to *moene. Latin *cum* is the equivalent of contemporary English "with" and indicates that two items belong to the same set. It conveys the notion of junction. *Moene is identified in old Latin words such as *moenis*, *munis* (with a long u) "the one who accomplishes his official duties, what he is in charge of". *Munia* is a plural form which is assumed to reflect the fact that such a charge is complex and includes many sub-tasks.   From the earliest contexts in which *communis* appears philologists infer a range of meanings: possibly "the sharing of duties by more than one person". The meaning, though, becomes more certain as soon as texts are found in which the adjective *communis* is opposed to *proprius* (particular to one person alone). *Communis* is used in Latin to translate the Greek word *koinos*. *Koine* meant in Greek the language that was shared by the greatest number. Hence the rhetorical notion of *topos koinos* = *locus communis* = *lieu commun* (French) = common place. Thus *communis* in classical Latin came to mean "mediocre", "vulgar" (from vulgus = the crowd) like the English "common".

How such a constellation of historical significations, that is, forms of consciousness, came to generate what we think we mean by the generic "communication" is undoubtedly one of the challenges that communicology should meet. The distinction between extensional and intensional definitions is a rhetorical rather than logical artifice because language evolves impervious to such considerations. Reflecting upon the semantic legacy of the term "communication" is undoubtedly a task that communicology cannot skip. The virtual semiotic sphere of "communication" is refracted in an abundant lexicon among the modern Indo-European languages, each instance, actually each utterance in its context, actualizes a form of consciousness directed toward a relatively circumscribed range of phenomena as the history of each particular language shows. Limiting the inquiry to the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Murray 1893), we can identify the parallel development of two conflicting models: the first one can be expressed by "sharing", a common denominator which implies symmetry and integrity since "communion" and "communication" equally can refer, for instance, to sharing a meal; it relates to the much earlier sense of contributing jointly toward a goal or the completion of a task; it also implies the shared emotion of a holistic experience. The second model also has ancient semantic roots but frames the metaphor differently: it is "giving something to someone". The "thing" being communicated can be a quality (a plant that communicates a bad odor to the fingers), a word (a name can be

communicated, that is, bestowed on someone), or an object (a disease, a letter, a gift); the giver necessarily parts with the object and this opens the possibility of cheating; more importantly it presupposes a separation which is not cancelled by the communication (a room which communicates through a passage with another room preserves its separate identity and the two rooms are kept apart precisely by what makes them communicate). At least these two contradictory models appear to be the distinctive semantic feature of the lexical family of communication in romance languages. This ambiguity translates into our current use of communication as the construction of a shared consciousness as well as the means by which some content is transferred from an agent to another and possibly as one-way traffic, hence the dissymmetry indicated by "communicating an order", a model that can also account for the notion of feedback acknowledging the reception of a message. It seems that these two contrasted values are lexically distinguished in modern Greek in which *sinenoisi,* whose etymology brings together *syn-* (with) and *noesis*, a word that is often translated by "thought" or "consciousness", designates the construction of a shared consciousness while *epikoinonia* is formed on the adjective *koinos* (common) and means to distribute something among a population, to make it common.

The problem which has been briefly sketched so far with reference to Greek and Latin etymology is compounded if we extend the inquiry to languages beyond the Indo-European area. For instance, Arabic offers a rich lexicon corresponding to the domain covered by English "communication" in its many senses. Let us cursorily examine three tri-literal roots and the terms they generated through nominal and verbal derivations, keeping in mind that they are not the only roots which generated a communication-relevant lexicon.

1. *WSL* (*wasala)* denotes the general notion of arriving at a point in space, and, consequently, of being contiguous with, even of being continuous with, eventually of being united with. This verb means to connect one thing to another such as fitting two pipes or hooking a ring to another to form a chain. It applies to physical, logical, and human contexts. Thus, it provides metaphors for both textual consistency and close, intimate friendship. Its most abstract meaning is: conjunction and the union which results from it. *Tawasul* means communication through conversation with the nuance of reaching a unified state of mind.

2. *SLH (salaha*) conveys the general sense of getting along, agreeing on something, reconciling and making peace with someone, mediating between parties, reaching a desirable state. It generated complex verbal derivates which denote communicating through telephone, fax, or the Internet. The focus is not on the transfer of information but on the goal of the interaction which is to overcome differences among interactants.

3. *HDT (hadatha)* refers to the kind of verbal or non verbal communication which characterizes the telling of stories or the reading of papers at a conference. Its derivates generated words for conversation, interview, and lecture. But its most general sense is "happening", making something happen, creating an event through speech. In the Muslim tradition, the *Hadiths* are the recordings of oral traditions as distinct from the written holy texts.

In Arabic dictionaries the words which are classified in alphabetic order are the tri-literal roots from which all the lexicon is derived. It is therefore relatively easy to identify the semantic sphere which these roots have generated because by following each of these roots and exploring their environment, we can find all the relevant words

irrespective of their beginnings which are various classificatory or modal prefixes and which, otherwise, would mechanically be disseminated in the dictionary if they were listed according to their first letter. A reflexive reading of these sets shows how the general notions attached to these roots irrigate, so to speak, the semantic diversity of the lexicon which has emerged over time as linguistic adaptations to social and technological changes.

The semantic landscape we can infer from the three examples above evokes a characterization of communication as the construction of joint states of consciousness rather than mere transfer of information, or at least it seems that the emphasis is not on the transfer as such but on its pragmatic goal of constructing common grounds and purposes.

3. Metaphors, models and theories

The investigation of etymologies ultimately leads the inquiry to the ever expanding field of metaphors and models. This is a vexed issue which cannot be circumscribed to rhetorical and literary phenomena alone. Philosophy and its modern avatars, such as semiotics, are swamped with concepts which can easily be identified as metaphors as soon as we step out of their close-knit and self-contained delusional discourses in which they appear to be semantically sustained by their denotative definitions. The question is not whether such discourses hang from root metaphors but which metaphors support and sustain their logical consistency. These ground metaphors are all the more invisible as they bias our perceptions and interpretations of phenomenological realities. Putting what we think we know between brackets as a phenomenologist would have it, may be a fallacy which consists of displacing the metaphor of mediating historical encumbrances with the metaphor of the transparent glass, as if the solution were to wipe out the dirt that has accumulated on the glass. Of course, a perfectly clean glass is still a visual metaphor which contributes to the discursive strategy of the naïve consciousness.

Metaphors are not necessarily erroneous constructs, though. They even might be never so. The mathematician René Thom used to say: "there are no false metaphors". They are all based on some kind of morphological or topological homologies. But they are always only approximations and they constitute a consubstantial part of the veil of the languages through which we endeavor to intuit or apprehend the essence of our objects of consciousness by attempting to focus on the apprehension itself rather than on the alienating objects of this consciousness. But articulating this attempt cannot fail to rely on language and, therefore, to metaphors *ad infinitum*. There are probably not any primordial images which can be identified as absolute beginnings but only types of relations which are signified by these conjunctions of metaphors through time.

Indeed, all metaphor leads to another metaphor, a quest that would be infinite if we were to look for an origin. But if we pay attention to the configurations that their collocations create from moment to moment and from context to context, they yield relations which may give reliable cognitive forms to inter-subjectivity. As we have seen through our cursory comparative exploration of etymologies, a fair part of the relevant

lexicon of communication draws from processes of working out common states of consciousness or, at least, achieving overlapping cognitive and emotional maps. Joint attention, repair, and compromise presuppose a "theory of mind" as a ground for constructing a common context and a common object of consciousness.

This is quite different from the technological models which have predominated in the 20th century in the form of trading information conceived (or rather imaged) as material contained in containers which can be carried or transported. The idea that information is conveyed by a medium (as a content by a container) ignores the fact that (i) the differential modifications of the medium is what matters and that such modifications must be related to each other by a conscious act of reading and (ii) this act requires the availability of both a working memory and a semantic memory. The tinkering by Roman Jakobson of a model combining Bulher's arc of communication and Shannon and Weaver's telecommunication circuits was uncritically received by semioticians in the last quarter of the 20th century and widely extrapolated to fields of inquiry well beyond linguistics. Such a model and the discourse it generated is precisely the kind of structure which obfuscates the understanding of human communication by foregrounding an artificial grid which adulterates the inter-subjective processes through which common states of mind are built.

A psychology of communication which assumes that information (in the form of a message) is transferred from point A to point B by means of C overlooks at least three important transformative processes in addition to the assumed encoding and decoding: (i) the transformative impact on A of expressing the information; (ii) the transformation of the medium C by the message and the converse; (iii) the impact of the information on B which is not a simple addition any more than the expressing from A is a subtraction. What is achieved in such a holistic process is not a transaction of commodities but the transformation of a complex state into another: the construction of a common state of cognition, consciousness, and emotion. Communication understood as the sharing of information implies the active, if not proactive construction of a common ground for action. The perspective thus shifts from the metaphor of shipping goods to the metaphor of collaborating to the construction of a building or the performing of a task. We cannot escape phenomenology because we cannot escape metaphors. What matters is that the greater the number of metaphors we can reconcile, the better chance we have to formulate a theory which transcends the scattering of images and words. This epistemological process parallels the comparative etymological exploration of the diverse lexicon of a semantic area.

The semiotics of communication, as represented by the Peirce-Morris-Sebeok paradigm tends to construe an ontology of signs as discontinuous entities somewhat like the balls of a pool game, each impact causing a move which itself will cause another impact followed by another move (infinite semiosis). It is doubtful, though, that such an image (sometimes dubbed the "bullet" theory) can enlighten our understanding of communication. The continuous fabric of joint consciousness which emerges in all humans from the moment they are born (and perhaps even some time before) is a prerequisite for the incessant transformative power of human interactions. Other metaphors may be called for if one is to account for communication in this sense.

4. Conclusion: communication as action in a game theory perspective

There has been a long-standing debate in evolutionary biology about whether communication consists of sharing relevant information among conspecifics or can be explained as the manipulating of others for one's own benefit. Whether communicating behavior is considered to be an altruistic or selfish trading of information as commodities or whether it is believed to have evolved as a tool of survival through the maximizing of some exploitative power on conspecifics and other species, it can be construed as a game with winners and losers. It is thus amenable to the formalization of game theory. Such an approach could appear as a mere attempt to reinstate a positivistic point of view on communication except that this game structure is the very form of consciousness which is always apprehended as euphoria (winning) or its contrary, the latter being a phenomenon that Erving Goffman dubbed "negative experience" (losing). Game theory will be taken in what follows as the exploration of still another metaphor that attempts to capture some essential features and properties of human communication.

Speech act theory has shown that verbal communication and gestures, at least to some extent, are actions which effect some changes through explicitly performing a change of symbolic status or through the implicatures of assertions, questions, or requests. But no effect could be possibly achieved if a common state of consciousness had not been constructed previously to these moves. What Roman Jakobson labeled the phatic function corresponding to the contact component of his syncretic model of linguistic communication is not a mere variable of human communication. It is not either a purely physical dimension of communication (ambiguously called the medium). It is the very condition of the possibility of any act of communication. The construction and maintenance of a common state of consciousness, or state of play, seem to be the main tasks of the social players who need this on-line contact in order to make their moves. These moves have cognitive values depending on how much information is introduced through the communicating act but they have at the same time emotional values in as much as they always modify positively or negatively the quality of the states of consciousness at play. Except probably for autistic individuals, communicating is a pleasurable experience even if the "objective" contents of the messages bring bad news. Shared bad news is the very essence of tragedies, either actual or virtual, which we relish as much if not more than stories with happy ending. It could be claimed that any communication which makes sense is in the form of a narrative (either implicitly or explicitly) and since all narratives can be formally understood as games, it is possible to relate the outcomes of these games to states of shared consciousness characterized by a feeling of euphoria irrespective of the nature of the outcomes. Naturally, the notion of moves implies that decisions are made in view of a state of play and decisions result in modified states of play depending on the pay off of the moves.

The question which could be raised at this point is whether we could consider communication as a kind of human addiction which could be understood along the line of other types of addictions. This would be still another metaphor prompted by the game metaphor (in the sense of gambling). But, perhaps, only a kaleidoscope of metaphors can reveal something interesting about human communication and provide communicology with unexplored perspectives.