

Paying Attention to Time in Communication Research

Johan Siebers

orcid: 0000-0002-6030-9646

Abstract: Communicative processes are extended in time, yet the question what we can learn about communication by paying attention to this temporal dimension has not been widely discussed. This chapter starts by situating temporal communication research within a broader ontological and decolonialising turn in the human and social sciences and proceeds to discuss the role of delay in the communication process. Two examples are used as illustration: (1) the role of delay in the unconscious dimensions of communication as utilized by the variable length of the analytic session in Lacanian psychoanalysis and (2) the function of delay for the poetic structure of all communication, which is explored in a close-reading of Pearse Hutchinson's poem *York Road*. The chapter concludes by placing attention to time in communication research within the constitutive metamodel of communication theory as developed by R. Craig.

1. Introduction: Time, the Ontological Turn and Communication Research Methods

In this chapter I will explore the role some aspects of temporality plays in communication research. My main focus will be on temporal methodology within the framework of a transformative conception of the humanities and social sciences (Epstein 2012). I understand temporal methodologies to be those forms of research and scholarship that work explicitly and reflexively with time in the research process, in pursuit of new knowledge. I understand transformative humanities and social sciences, after Epstein and J.K. Gibson-Graham, to refer to scholarship and research which works with a performative ontology that recognises that the act of creating new knowledge serves also to bring new worlds into being. A reflection on the uses of temporalities in communication research therefore serves two goals: if we become more aware of the way temporality impacts on communication our knowledge creation with respect to communication will become richer and deeper. This knowledge may then help us to raise the level of awareness of ourselves and others as communicators and create new communication worlds. I will refer to both aspects together by the term "temporal attunement". We might think of these aspects as the theoretical and the practical side of the

awareness of time in the study of communication, but I do not want to set too much stock by the distinction between theory and practice, as that distinction has its roots in classical European thought and is therefore marked by some of the abstract oppositions (for example contemplation and action, mind and body, self and other) that the study of communication precisely can, and ought to, liberate us from (Siebers 2019).

Communicative interaction constitutes social relationality. Yet communicative interaction is also organized, structured and abstracted from the concreteness of personal interaction, by social institutions and by the general drivers of social structuration, which Luhmann aptly summarized as “money and power” (Luhmann 1995). Habermas (1984) used the term “colonisation of the lifeworld by systems” to indicate how functional, alienated and reified rationality, tends to parasitically nestle itself in the communicative lifeworld, necessitating a never-ending process of mediation between communication and socialization, two forces which rely on each other and yet are also always in tension. While social structures make form of communicative interaction possible which would not be possible without them, they also have an inherent tendency to obscure the underlying level of human communication as a concrete practice without which these structures could not exist. Much communication research is situated at the juncture of these two dimension of life, for example Pinchevski (2019), who explores how trauma is transformed by media institutions and media technology, and vice versa. Communication studies as an institution in modern societies allows its members to become aware of the colonisation of our communicative environment by social forces. In its practical dimensions, the discipline can then contribute to what we might call the decolonisation of the lifeworld, to creating sustainable communication environments and to empower people to become conscious communicators.

While in the work of past generations of communication theorists the lifeworld of communicative interaction is mostly conceptualized in terms of an exclusively human, if not Eurocentric, sphere of subjective articulation and rationalisation (allowing for various notions of subjectivity, from the personal to the decentralized subject of Lacanian analysis), contemporary communication research begins to explore the exciting connections between the decolonisation of the communicative lifeworld and the decolonisation of epistemologies, ontologies and cultures. A truly transformative confluence of strands of thought has emerged recently, with the potential to generate new understanding and new practices, for human as well as non-human communication. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s groundbreaking work in cultural anthropology paves the way for an understanding of Amerindian myth that is no

longer indebted to structuralism or post-structuralism but instead allows us to transform the notion of the human in a way that frees it from its exclusively cultural connotations while at the same time allowing for a much richer understanding of communicative interaction as a natural, ontological phenomenon: “If Western relativism has multiculturalism as its public politics, Amerindian shamanic perspectivism has multinaturalism as its cosmic politics (...) Thus if a subject is an insufficiently analyzed object in the modern naturalist world, the Amerindian epistemological convention follows the inverse principle, which is that an object is an insufficiently interpreted subject. (...) When everything is human, the human becomes a wholly other thing” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 60-63). The implied paradigmatic change these remarks aim at will help us to divest implicit humanist and subjectivist presuppositions of our concept of communication and of the methodologies required to study it. However, we must also point out that the continued use of terminology that has its roots in classical European thought (“metaphysics”, “epistemology”, “perspective”, “ontology”, “subject”, “object”), is at odds with the transformation in thought we, as well as Viveiros de Castro himself, seeks to achieve. An integrationist approach to communication (Pablé 2019) could be explored to address some of these problems.

At this juncture it becomes fruitful to turn our attention to what, with the benefit of hindsight, can be appreciated as an early attempt to articulate a decolonising approach to social understanding, namely Peter Winch’s anti-positivist *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (1958, 2008), with the central use Winch makes of Wittgenstein’s notion of *forms of life* (Wittgenstein 2009), the irreducible ensemble of social practices that have to be understood on their own terms if we are to make sense of what they mean. We cannot place ourselves outside of forms of life to study and objectively understand them by reference to a universal frame of reference nor can we interpretively approach them with an eye to a fusion of horizons that would allow us to wallow in another kind of universality, the generalized beholding of the fact that understanding always means understanding differently (Gadamer 2004). Rather, the social scientist (and this includes the communication researcher) can only encounter them with everything she is, and engage in a self-reflective, always unfinished, process of actually and concretely relating to them across all modalities of relationality and giving expression to this relating in action, thought and word. Listening to someone’s story, for example, is not exhausted by interpreting their words so they make some sense to me, nor by measuring their words against my own yard stick of observable fact. Nor is it exhausted by carefully navigating the Scylla of identifying appropriation and the

Charybdis of the impossible acknowledgement of incommunicable difference. As Lipari (2014, 175) points out, listening to someone's story means "listening someone to speech", an embodied, real, practical form of relating to a concrete other that can lay no prior claim to what might be understood or not, said or not, heard or not. Understanding what is involved here makes it necessary for us to move away from some of the basic categories of thought that have structured the European understanding of communication, mostly implicitly, since its inception.

The ontological turn reflects an increased sensibility for these material, embodied, "real" dimensions of social experience. Overcoming an abstract opposition between epistemology, as concerned with representations of reality, and ontology, as concerned with the question *what there is*, the ontological turn aims to put at the forefront of methodological awareness an appreciation of the intertwining of modes of understanding and modes of being, of world making as a creative process in which the neat line that once separated the researchers from the object of study (and that is present as much in the administrative aspects of present-day institutionalised, methodologically plural social science as in the earlier staunch positivism) is revealed as an illusion, itself the function of an unreflected social dynamic (the instrumentalisation of reason; Habermas 1984) more than the stern demand of methodological purity. In the words of Hauck and Heurich (2018), writing about indigenous language ontologies:

the refusal to take people's descriptions as anything but descriptions and to entertain the possibility that what people say about the nature of things might be actually real, inevitably places "their" descriptions on an unequal footing with "ours" (...) i.e., in most cases "Western" assumptions about the nature of reality. (...) [T]he ontological turn challenges any ontology which holds that only one approach to reality is scientific and worthy of pursuit by serious thinkers. (2018, 2)

The affinity to Winch's and Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life becomes palpable here, because they exist in the terms in which they are described by those participating in them.

Where, in the earlier temporal turn in social thought, time as a social factor was rediscovered as an object of study, the ontological turn allows a complementary shift of focus, namely to reflect on working with time in researching social life, assuming the reality of the various modes of temporality that we find in the way people live together, and to situate our

knowledge production as enabling, illuminating, enhancing and critiquing social practices. Once we take the ontological turn, social imagination and social research as its vehicle become intrinsically modes of practical, dialogical engagement between ways of world making, in which no perspective dominates others and in which researcher and researched merge into each other, sharing a world precisely insofar as they embody the recognition of a plurality of “realities”. Social science acquires a dimension of practical world making in addition to its more traditional aspects of observation and analysis. The same holds for the humanities, where a more explicit awareness of humanities scholarship as participating in human creativity and not only describing and interpreting it, has led to an increased focus on the future-oriented, transformative and practical dimension of humanities-informed cultural understanding (Epstein 2012).

Part of the reason why the word “turn” seems to suggest itself so easily when we look at the way social science and humanities develop lies perhaps in the fact that there is seldom anything completely new in these fields. Weary observers might feel that fads and fashions rule the day, and may contrast this situation with the more steady progress made in the natural sciences, where paradigmatic shifts occur with at least some interval and also usually settle methodological issues for a substantial amount of time, even if only in the recognition that certain problems, as yet, remain unsolved. Not so in the fields of study that we are working in. As society changes, the disciplinary reflection on society changes as well. We might think of the social sciences and humanities as that social function that reflects social reality back to itself, and that has become, as so many epistemic functions, institutionalised and socialised during the course of modernisation. Reflexive modernisation and the ontological turn meet as ways of self-articulation of social orders and of the human lives lived within those orders, as I indicated above by contrasting the social and the communicative orders of existence.

The ontological turn embodies, perhaps more than just a strictly theoretical and philosophical concern, a sensitivity and sensibility for taking the lives of others seriously, an appreciation of the fact that we have to listen to people on their own terms if we are to understand the world they live in and if we are to be able to engage in genuine dialogue with others rather than in instrumental or technical control of social relations. Such a sensibility is always needed. Each time and space experiences its own need for it. It provides us with an important clue as to what social knowledge and understanding are. Insofar as social science is concerned with autonomy and the practice of freedom, it is necessary for each generation of scholars to

acquire for themselves the reflective position that allows them to actively and creatively listen to others as they tell their stories and shape their worlds and in doing so enable others to do the same. The contemporary interest in retrieving and redeploying the notion of *forms of life* in critical theory illustrates this need.

After ideology critique, discourse ethics and the struggle for recognition, scholars are concerned more and more to understand lives on their own terms, as contextualised and yet autonomous experiments in dealing with the many possibilities, good and bad, that life throws at us (Jaeggi 2013, 2015). The turn to forms of life allows both for a more experimental, provisional and multi-perspectival approach to understanding how people live their lives in the global economy and ecology, as well as for a less hegemonic understanding of modernisation and cultural interaction. The focus on forms of life contributes to the decolonisation of social thought. Autonomy transforms into autonomous registers for action, deliberation and valuation; structure and agency move into each other's direction: "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so once could say – *forms of life*" (Wittgenstein 2009, 174).

Winch applied this idea to the question what sociological knowledge is, arguing for the radical difference between natural science and social science. Social science relies on an empathetic stance in which the researcher tries to understand (not appropriate) social practices as forms of life. Understanding a form of life in the way Wittgenstein spoke about it, means methodologically to engage in the process of asking ourselves what it means *to live life like that*. But, as I said, this is not a hermeneutical, positivist or even Levinasian ethical undertaking. If we want to understand what being a fish in water is, will have to get ourselves wet, actually and metaphorically, and we cannot remain observers on dry land any more than we can learn to swim by practising strokes next to the pool. If we want to understand someone's story, we will have to listen to what they have to say; listening involves us as persons.

Pettit (2000) summarizes Winch's account of method in social science in six principles, three of which he endorses also for contemporary social science and three of which he relegates to history. The first set or three are the "rules thesis", the "practicality thesis" and the "participation thesis". Understanding human action means understanding how action is produced, so to understand the constitutive "rules" or self-descriptions according to which it is produced. This means being able to grasp the practical intentions people have when they act and this, in turn, implies that the social researcher does not observe from a distance, but

takes part in the full depth of the social practices she tries to understand. One implication here is that social research and the humanities have much to say to each other. Participation can take many forms, indeed listening is an often overlooked but essential form of it. Pettit dismisses the inclination of Winch to assimilate social science to “armchair sociology”, in which the reconstruction in thought of the underlying rules, categories and intentions of forms of life becomes the main activity of the social researcher. He also dismisses Winch’s emphasis on the independent agency of social structures over against individual agency and his concomitant lack of attention for the ways in which social structures might exercise undue power and domination over human beings, a key tension that the study of communication is concerned with. In his preface to the 2008 edition of *The Idea of a Social Science* Winch largely accepted these criticisms. They underscore the relevance of ideology critique and of inquiry into power hierarchies and structures of domination as real dimensions of forms of life.

This revised Winchian approach to method in social research as the *participatory study of forms of life* offers a concretization of the ontological turn that is particularly useful for discussing the role of time in researching communication and for understanding how attentiveness to the time of communication helps us to understand aspects of communication that would stay hidden otherwise. Winch argues (2008, 85-88) that prediction can never be the goal of social science. Since “voluntary behaviour is behaviour for which there is an alternative” (85) and since understanding something means being able to envisage its opposite, Winch argues that doing something with understanding means being able to imagine the possibility of not doing it. Both the possibility of historical tradition, in other words our relation to the past, as well as our engagement in social practices in the present, as our anticipation of the future, cannot be construed on the basis of a “no alternatives” view. These temporal relations would simply not be social temporal relations in that case. But action for which there is an alternative (as a constitutive factor of that action) is action that cannot be predicted on the basis of laws, algorithms or inferences, even if in many cases I might be able to “predict” what someone is going to do. The point is that we would not say our social understanding is complete if we can predict what someone is going to do next, just as we would not say the goal of linguistics is to predict what someone is going to say next. “When we speak of the possibility of scientific prediction of social developments (...), we literally do not understand what we are saying. We cannot understand it, because it has no sense” (88). (This, of course, does not mean that prediction is not part of some forms of life.)

At this point, social research can become aware of another natural connection to the humanities, if we think of them, as Epstein does, as concerned with understanding human creativity from the inside out. Both fields are then concerned with what Levitas, following H.G. Wells, calls “the imaginative reconstitution of society” (Levitas 2013). In much contemporary research this dimension often remains unconscious or implicit, but it guides analysis and discussion as most of what we do in social research would be meaningless if it were not informed by some form of practical orientation. A horizon of imaginative anticipation, rather than prediction, is constitutive not only of social action and communication but also of their study, understanding and critique.

What can we learn about human communication by being attentive in our research to the effect time has on it? We all know about everyday experiences that depend on the temporality of communication. Some moments are better than others for raising certain topics of conversation. Sophocles says nothing can be done except at the right moment. This insight into *kairos* applies also to communicative acts and it shows us that speaking is much more than deciding to open your mouth and let words come out. It involves cognition, intuition, character and emotion; speaking is not a phonetic process alone or even primarily; it is an ethical, which means relational, act. Rhetoric was always a matter of the right word at the right time. Sometimes we realise only after an encounter has taken place what we really had wanted to say, or the words come to us only after the fact. On the other hand, we can feel impatient and eager to communicate, for example in taking turns in a conversation, and may even feel compelled to interrupt the time of another speaker to seize the word. We can forget what we wanted to communicate or a memory can come back to us and speak of things long gone as if they are present in our lives this very moment. The search for lost time revolves around communication, a spectral haunting of something both gone and still present, while it seems that, without a future horizon, we cannot make sense at all of the act of communicating. “I speak because I have hope in others” (Ong 1967, 315). Again, something that needs to be said between people can take years for the people involved to find the courage to speak the words that had been waiting for them; or we may let the time when something could be communicated go by for good. Just as our lives are suspended in interwoven strands of temporality, coexisting, moving with or against each other, so our communicative existence bears all the features of temporality, presence, past and future.

Some of these examples seem to point to a dual structure of communication: a conscious and an unconscious dimension. Unconscious communication involves such phenomena as implicit body language and gestures, uncontrollable voice modulations and other involuntary external indicators of one's inner state. However, it may also involve deeper levels of our mental and physical functioning which may come to the fore in some of the experiences of delayed communication mentioned above. The temporal aspects of psychoanalytic work can help us understand these structures of delay and the role they play in communication, both with ourselves and others. So by investigating the role of time in the psychoanalytic relation we can obtain a deeper insight into the nature of communication. In what follows I will show how attentiveness to the time of analysis can inform our understanding of communication. At the same time, the results of this investigation may inform our view of the research process itself, as that is inconceivable without the interfusion of many different levels of communication. My interest in exploring the relations between time, analysis and communication is motivated by the relative absence (despite a few important exceptions) of attention for the unconscious dimensions of communication in contemporary communication studies (Samuels 2015). Yet, without an account of these dimensions it seems impossible to do justice to the experienced reality of communication and the importance of communication in people's lives.

In order to develop a more adequate and real, authentic way of using the concept of communication to articulate realities and experiences of people, we cannot ignore the unconscious.

For Freud the unconscious is a region of mental functioning in which there are no boundaries and in which time does not exist. The unconscious represents the drive function of the human being, which aims for satisfaction. "Nothing is lost in the unconscious" and consequentially there "is no time" in the unconscious (Freud 2001, 187). An injury to our sense of dignity that has been repressed will return as a symptom, but for the unconscious the grievance is as real after years or decades as it was in the moment it was inflicted and repressed. For this reason the work of analysis consists in lifting the repressions so the feelings associated with a traumatic occurrence can again become live, but now open to being worked through by being made conscious in the analytic relationship rather than brushed under the carpet of repression. We can say that bringing experiences back into time, so they can become temporal, can be

lived through and dealt with so life can go on, constitutes an essential element of healing in psychoanalysis.

If the unconscious is atemporal and if life flows, and is therefore historical and temporal, analysis, conceived of as an activity that brings to consciousness what was rendered unconscious before, is a process of temporalization. The fact that we can make a distinction between aspects of unconscious mental life that can be brought to consciousness and aspects of mental life that are inaccessible to such a process poses a problem for this view, as it is only in the temporalizing activity of analysis that we even come to an appreciation of the inaccessible dimensions of the drive, which become apparent only in manifestations but never directly. As analysts as different as Freud, Jung, Lacan, Klein, Winnicott and Bion have all argued, there is an unanalysable core to the human person. One of the goals of analysis is to for the analysand to come to the point where they can live from that core even if it remains out of awareness. In communication we can have the peculiar experience that we do not know what we are going to say next, or that we feel our words “come from nowhere”, and yet, sometimes, we say what we want to say. This experience illustrates this “darkness of the lived moment”, as Bloch calls it, that yet is the source of light, of our experience of a definite world in which we have definite and authentic agency, even if adumbrated by not-knowing (Bloch 2000, 154).

The method of psychoanalysis, the talking cure, is through and through communicative: free association (saying what comes to mind with as little restriction as possible) and non-judgemental interpretation of what is being said in this way, during a regular, fixed amount of time, spent in a confidential space by two people (or more, in the case of group analysis), so in a time away from everyday time and a space away from everyday space. Even the bare bones of the analytic frame point to an intimate connection between time and talk.

The introduction by Lacan of the variable length of the analytic session emphasises this connection even more. Lacan held that the time in between session is as important, if not more so, than the time spent in analytic conversation. The variable length of the session makes it possible to make good use of this time in between. By ending a session at the moment when a particular theme, word, question, feeling or problem is raised that is part of the symptom the analysand wants to find a new way with, the session function as a message

that is sent back into everyday time for the analysand to work with, to come to understand. Two assumptions can be identified here. One is expressed by Freud in a letter to Fliess:

“I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces being subject from time to time to a re-arrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances – to a re-transcription. Thus what is essentially new about my theory is the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over, that it is laid down in various species of indications.” (Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 6.12.1896)

The analysis does not proceed in a linear way but “several times over”, over many different layers of memory, where the same things come back again and again in different forms. The time in between sessions makes it possible to become aware of the different “transcriptions” because the analyst can end each session at a different salient point, so to speak, of the unconscious vortex that structures the memory traces of the analysand. Much of the skill and empathy of the Lacanian analyst, and much of the transference work that goes on in the analysis, stems from the analyst’s ear as to when to say “here we stop”. The end of communication is the message, inversely mirroring the end of communication of material by repression into the unconscious: “it shatters discourse only in order to bring forth speech” (Lacan 2008, 260). The analysand is left to his or her own devices until the next session.

The other assumption characterises Lacanian psychoanalysis specifically. Freud had noticed that slips of the tongue seem to have an unconscious intention. The speaker is not aware of what he or she apparently (also) wanted to say, but still the intention finds expression in the form of a “mistake”, assuming that some form of goal-oriented activity must be present in the production of all behaviour. We might say that here we have the pure form of the symptom. The “mistake” both reveals and masks the unconscious intention. Lacan takes the step to say that the speaker not only communicates the unconscious intention to the addressees of his communication, but always also to themselves: “in human speech, the sender is always a receiver at the same time” (Lacan 1993, 24). The analyst is the one who makes it possible for the speaker to receive this message in its full significance, which allows the analysand to become aware of what they are really saying to themselves. The analysand receives her own message back from the analyst but in an inverted way (Lacan 2008). The familiar Lacanian

“nudge” returns the message to the sender in such a way as to point the attention, without any interpretation, to the form of the message and to the implications of the occasion of uttering it (“why this now?”). But this act by which the analyst “returns to sender” *takes time*, in between sessions, during the session and its often dramatic, cliff-hanger ending, and across the entire duration of the analysis. In my own Lacanian analysis a time “in between” sessions of one year was necessary for me to hear what I had been saying to myself for decades. When I returned to my analyst after having been away for all that time, I could say in the first session what I had not been able to say for years and a tight strap around my heart sprung open because I could speak those words. I had left my analysis feeling I was abandoning my analyst, with the excuse of going on a sabbatical. During this year-long sabbath in my communication, but without consciously working on it, the message I had been giving to myself (who abandoned whom?) and which my analyst had inversely returned to me by accepting my departure, found its way into my speech. After a year I could say I had to abandon her in order to access my own abandonment trauma, that had wreaked havoc through screen memories, depression, false identifications, self-denial, suspicion and phobic responses for many years, without ever coming to the surface as a real feeling. The delay in communication was the constitutive factor that allowed my message to myself to reach its destination and then to alter the way I dealt with my own life and what had occurred in it.

2. Temporal methodology: the poetic structure of all communication

If we want to develop a general methodology for communication research on the basis of these considerations, we may look to develop a procedure by which we pay attention to temporal dimensions of (intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, institutional or social) communication, especially the function of delay, in order to articulate an unconscious, implicit level of intentionality that, once brought out into the full light of day, would become open to interpretation, critique, creative transformation and alternatives or simply, as, for example, in when we gain explicit clarity about values we hold, to a more conscious and free endorsement of what matters to us.

We saw that the use Lacanian analysis makes of the link between time and communication draws attention to the fact that all communication is a communication with another but always also a communication to self. Lacanian analysis also shows us that we may come to understand the message to self in the way it comes back to us via another and that this

“return” operates in the space of the delay, the abeyance, the in-between-times. If we were to insist on an instant interpretation or understanding of what we are telling ourselves, we would be bound to miss it as we would be under the spell of our repressions. Only afterwards, unnoticed and sudden almost, can the message do its work, uncensored by our defences, and deliver its content to us.

Investigating and writing about communication in this way would entail a practice that embodies the participatory, listening stance of the ontological turn and the study of forms of life. We would not place ourselves outside of the communications as impartial observers or hermeneutical subjects. Rather, we would patiently and attentively listen, seek to respond in our writing and thinking, and allow the meaning of what is communicated to inform our knowing. It is not easy to put this into words; I envisage a way of knowing, a particular form of attentiveness to the inexhaustible significance of communicative interaction, to which the communication scholar bears testimony as far as she is able in a particular context and at a particular time. This form of knowledge as thick description and responsive listening is as much theory as engaged practice and perhaps resembles most closely what Freire calls “conscientization”, a form of knowledge that exists in the unity of reflection and action, in this case with respect to communicative interaction (Freire 1968). One thing it stands up for in its own performative mode is the patience that is needed to understand what is communicated. This patience will then also come to characterize our own scholarship.

And so we have, if not a method then at least a procedure, with which we can notice, work with and attend to a dimension of communication that would otherwise have escaped us. We can look for the delayed and reflective dimensions of communication in all spheres of life as an analytic instrument or theoretical and operational method. We can utilise our awareness of the importance of “the time in between” for the significance of our communicative engagement with self and others to inform and design practices of communication that critique a view of communication as a fully transparent, instant sharing of information and that resist the trend to force all interaction into that caricature. We might even be inspired to adopt a variable length approach to our own communications. Hegemonic regimes of knowledge operate with the fantasy of the frictionless circulation of meaning and information. Could an awareness of the link between time and communication as we have articulated it not function as the back bone of epistemic practices that would break those regimes of knowing, allow for genuine polyvocality and at the same time have space for a

materially substantial notion of communication in which different epistemologies do not have to coexist like ships passing in the night? I may not understand how my message to myself is fed back by you and vice versa, but as we find ways to live together, we might both make valuable discoveries. An awareness and appreciation of the unconscious, and that means also of the not arbitrarily available, dimension of communication would render all human practices that involve communication more truthful. Such an awareness passes through the lens of time. I will elaborate an example to illustrate these points.

In the academic year 2020/2021 I convened a seminar on the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber. Our group met online because of the Corona pandemic. We asked ourselves if the kind of dialogue that Buber speaks about, the genuine presence with the other, is possible in an online meeting with participants from practically all time zones on the planet. Yet, as the year went on, there were many experiences of meaningful conversation. Many participants valued that we had the opportunity to speak with each other in a group and across great distances, that we could find out almost everyone was going through similar experiences of isolation and estrangement. On one occasion, Caitriona Ni Dhuill, professor of German at University College Cork and regular participant, brought a poem she wanted to share because it made a reference to Buber, at first sight rather trite and mildly comical. As we discussed the poem in the group during a two-hour session, interspersed with silences, its meaning gradually became clearer and richer, not unlike the memory work in analysis that Freud describes. The simple and familiar experience of giving oneself time to allow meanings to emerge that you could not formulate in any other way or at any other moment, became palpable to all. But this taking time, related to the time of interpretation in the extendedness of the hermeneutical circle, is not yet the use of the time of communication as method that I am concerned with here. It was afterwards, with a delay, that a level of meaning dawned on some of us that pushed the poem out of its own gravitational pull, that made it into a Lacanian “saying”, in the mouths of the readers, and one that expresses the relation between time and communication as explored here. The poem in question is *York Road*, by Pearse Hutchinson (Hutchinson 2014, 14-5)ⁱ:

York Road

Walking down York Road
making for Upper Rathmines

at the point where high hedges
give way to low walls
a man and a woman
come towards me, both stout,
middle-aged, well-hapt-up,
the man slightly ahead,
they used to be called tinkers,
the woman's hair still fair,
that glorious distinctive shade.

Today the three of us
are alone in the road.

The man and I exchange
perfunctory greetings
but the woman stop me:
'Do you like apples?' she says,
offering a brown-paper bag
with two big red apples in it
impaling me on the horns
of a truth-teller's dilemma
for I never liked biting
apples and much less now,

but to tell her the truth –
would be unforgivably rude.
Besides, what would Martin
Buber think of me?

So I tell a happy lie –
my mother turning in her grave,
my father dancing in his –
and thank the kind woman,
and she and I exchange

heartfelt good wishes, and part.

Buber distinguishes the I/Thou relation, which is an authentic encounter between integral individuals, from the I/it relation, in which both “I” and “it” are only involved partially and instrumentally. In the poem, a happy lie safeguards a genuine, heartfelt encounter from deteriorating into a situation in which neither the poet nor the woman could be fully present because an offer would have been refused. The situation is one of the everyday sensitivities surrounding politeness. Refusing an offer, from someone in a socially different position, is a tricky affair. Better to go along with the situation, for what would Martin Buber say. Well, what would he say? Would he not say that social relations have here triumphed over the genuine interhuman encounter? Without honesty there can be no encounter. Like the apple, a symbol with biblical connotations, whose gift, knowledge, is initially refused by him, the poet hands the reader an offer as well. Who seduces whom into taking a bite, against their inclination? What does the apple have to tell us, what am I telling myself via the poet, when I read this poem? The apple handed by a woman symbolizes knowledge no less than sin and poison. The paradisiacal couple, wanderers over the earth, and the disguised witch are in perfect, undecidable equilibrium.

Alone in the road the three people meet. There is no context to fall back on and the meeting is already there, inevitably, simply by the three walking towards each other. The apple is handed over in an act of mutual recognition, as it were to underscore the meeting itself, and all go their own way. What was handed over? The poet wants to acknowledge the woman despite the fact that he never used to like apples, and “much less now”, perhaps a reference to his age. The I/Thou relation becomes a moral act of making present, an act to which Martin Buber apparently cajoles or seduces us, much as the poet lets the woman cajole or seduce him, without saying a word, into accepting the apple. What about the man who is with her? A perfunctory greeting, like men so often do. The woman stops the poet, the man would not have taken the trouble. We think we get the picture: the self-referential message of the poem is no less banal than the clichéd, misguided reference to Buber. We, the readers, hover between the two men, perfunctorily browsing a book of poetry, or allowing ourselves to be stopped on our way by the poet, the woman, who hands us something we have no use or

desire for, an alien message but something the poet wants to give us. The apple stands for the poem, which requires a happy lie to be heard. The poets lie, but they can only do so because their audience colludes with their lies. The situation seems not very different from the one that underpins the humour of a joke. The person telling the joke is given permission by the hearers to transgress the boundaries of acceptable communication, in return for giving the audience pleasure. The happy lie at the poetological level must be the triteness of the reference to Buber, of the same nature as the polite façade that allows the exchange of the richly symbolical gift.

But only after the work of interpretation (“exchanging heartfelt good wishes”) has been done and we have put the poem aside or closed the book (“and part”) can the message arrive that all persons in the poem, including the reader, are interchangeable, that even the act of interpreting the poem follows the structure of the gift, so that there is a spiralling or mirroring of levels of interpretations at work here which ultimately allows for the conclusion that the poem returns to us our own meanings, or even ourselves. The text embodies Lacan’s principle of the sender getting the message back in inverted form from the receiver. This insight into the poetic structure of all communication requires an interruption of the interpretation process, in order to be established, as we experienced it in the seminar. It requires a delay, by which the self-referential, endless spiral of interpretations, “discourse”, is interrupted and suspended so a message can be brought home and animate speech.

3. Implications for working with time in communication research

Does all of this amount to a method? Perhaps we are doing no more than developing a certain sensibility, an awareness of a dependency relation among concepts which helps us to feel justified in taking our time for an understanding of communication that is not directly empirical, but that has room for the implicit dimensions of meaning to ripen.

Yet, to remain with the poem for a little bit longer, the poet gives us a clue. A method, at least in the etymology of the word, is a way of doing things, or more precisely a way (ὁδός) along or over which to travel with a certain aim (μετά). A method is a way to go (about something). The three persons in the poem are doing just that. They are walking along a road, in opposite directions, perhaps achieving, in the end, the same goal.

In this generalised sense we can say that attentiveness to the time of communication is indeed a method that allows us to see layers of meaning that might otherwise escape us. This comes out most clearly, perhaps, by considering the opposed movement of the people in the poem. The couple moves in one direction, the poet in another. Mutual respect enables an encounter, the meaning of which dawns on us, of necessity, later. No one can tell the other what to think or do in the moment of encounter. Only a question is posed and an answer enacted. Each with their own thoughts: we glimpse what doing research in the ontological turn, or in the manner of Winch, is like.

Buber emphasises the spatial directionality of opposition in his writings on the I/Thou relation. I and Thou are “over against” each other, not “with” or “next to” each other. Only when turned in opposition to each other, when distanced from each other in that way, can they enter into relation, can an encounter that is both a giving and a withholding, like all genuine communication, take place. Only in that way can the partners in dialogue become themselves in relation with the other (Buber 1965).

As suggested above, such a model of communication can perhaps be extended to illuminate communication between cultures, epistemologies and ontologies in a decolonised world. For we have fundamentally removed the misconception that communication requires a shared code in which to frame understanding by a process of interpretation. Rather, we have a conception of communication that is both relational, in that it connects and connects universally, as well as non-hegemonic, in that the poetic moment of return is constitutive of all communication, which means that as we communicate in a genuine manner we put ourselves in a position where we have to be open to receiving a message that might change us. Only, this no longer takes the form of an always fraught and precarious balancing act between the claims, expressions, aims and experiences of self and other; there is no fusion of horizons in this kind of communication. No, as we relate to someone else, we are thrown back upon ourselves and from that position all communicative moves are open. The contours begin to emerge of a way of thinking about the encounter between different ways of world making and different lived worlds that avoids both the extremes of solipsist relativism on one hand and either the universal, ahistorical rationality or a historicised hermeneutics, on the other.

4. Ramifications for communication theory

What are the implications of the analysis we have introduced here for the development of a broader practice of working with time in research? For this final section, I would like to base myself on the seminal article by Robert Craig, “Communication Theory as a Field”, a text that has exercised a vast and continuing influence on research in the discipline of communication studies (Craig 1999). Craig developed a view of communication studies as a field that lacks a unified method and that misunderstands itself if it tries to look for one. Communication studies, Craig argues, is based in everyday meanings, practices and understandings of communication that human beings already have, simply because they are conscious of their communications. We know about the power of words, about the difference between authentic and inauthentic communication, about the way we might believe in stories based on less than full evidence, but also about the indispensable role of storytelling for our sense of identity. We know about the signs that we use in communication and we know about misunderstandings and noise that can distort what we communicate or how we receive what others try to say to us. Craig argues that these experiences with communication constitute a kind of folk knowledge of communication that people can utilize when communication goes awry. In the history of the academic discipline of communication, a history that starts with the Greek rhetoricians and which only in the past 200 years has started to fully burgeon, this folk knowledge has become the basis for theoretical traditions such as rhetoric, semiotics, critical theory, cybernetics, social psychology and information theory. As theoretical developments of “native” insight into communication these traditions are useful resources to draw upon when dealing with practical communication challenges. The coherence of the field is not one of the search for a theory of everything, but of the continuous development, within their own parameters, of these traditions of reflection on communication. Craig characterizes the relation the traditions have to each other as “dialogical-dialectical coherence”. In a constant conversation between perspectives that emphasize different, sometimes contradictory, moments in communication, the traditions both learn from each other and critique each other. On the whole, a more balanced, reflective, appreciating, conscious communicative praxis can be enhanced by research in all traditions in the field, to the benefit of individuals and communities.

Craig’s framework represents a milestone in communication studies. It has provided the blueprint for curricula, textbooks and research design since it was first published. We can

easily see that we can insert our method of paying attention to time, to allow the unconscious dimension of communication to speak, into this framework for the field. Perhaps a slightly wider treatment of communication from a psychoanalytical point of view would constitute a full-fledged tradition in its own right, one that could both be informed by others and vice versa. But even the orientation of time alone can uncover dynamics in all the traditions that have, perhaps, not received much attention until now. The fact that communication always has an unconscious dimension, one that can be perceived at work when we attune ourselves to the temporal dimension of communication, can, in this way, be illuminated from all different perspectives in communication research.

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