The Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication: A cultural approach to interaction

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This essay proposes a Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication (PMC) for expanding the practical role of metatheory (a theory of theories), conceived here as a useful tool for directly analyzing interpersonal interactions. Traditionally, metatheory has been used in an epistemological way (e.g., for the organization of knowledge) rather than in a practical way. However, starting from the traditions of thought proposed by Craig in his article Communication theory as a field, this essay argues and illustrates that metatheory can also be useful for making direct analysis of communication and enriching, at the same time, our understanding of communicative conflicts. This challenge is answered by the PMC, a (meta)model articulated on three levels: culture (shared values), dialectical tensions (contradictions that are primary forces in relationships) and metacommunication (talk about communication).

1. Introduction

"My last problematic conversation was about the amount of geographical distance we have between us. . .. Since we are so far away, she has trust issues because she does not know what I am doing here. She does not take time to be understanding." This excerpt from an undergraduate interpersonal questionnaire[1] illustrates how a male partner describes the main problem of his romantic relationship. In general, problematic conversations appear when subjects perceive that something is not working in the relationship because of a misunderstanding–failure in the understanding or disagreement. Problematic conversations frequently are related with one of the dialectical tensions that characterize relationships: those related to autonomy, self-disclosure or predictability (Baxter, 1990). These dialectical tensions provide fertile grounds for partners to construct conflictive interactions.

In response to understanding problematic conversations, this paper develops the Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication (PMC), a theoretical proposal for analyzing relational misunderstandings related with autonomy, self-disclosure or predictability and for proposing communicative solutions. It is considered a metamodel because it is based on different discourses about communication (communication about communication). And these different points of view give subjects the opportunity to re-think their interactions in light of different communicative perspectives. The latter derive from the fact that the PMC is a model based on metatheory (also called theoretical metadiscourse), specifically on the different traditions of thought in communication (semiotic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, critical, phenomenological, and cybernetic) proposed by Robert T. Craig in his Constitutive Metamodel (CM) included in his article Communication theory as a field (1999). According to Craig, the traditions, apart from organizing knowledge, represent different ways of talking about communication and its problems (practical or ordinary metadiscourse). And this is the starting point of the PMC, a pragmatic model that proposes that metatheory is not just a useful way for organizing knowledge, but it is also a practical art useful for researching our communication processes and solving problems. I will take into account the alternative points of view included in Craig's (1999) metamodel (semiotic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, critical, phenomenological, and cybernetic) in my design of alternative ways of thinking and solving problematic interactions.

Because theoretical and ordinary metadiscourse influence each other, I propound that thinking about our (conflictive) interactions from different points of view will help us overcome our communicative problems. This idea aligns with Dewey's pragmatism. As Craig (2007, p. 143) has argued "the project of communication theory under a constitutive metamodel, as a pragmatist enterprise,

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[1] This excerpt is taken from a report on the project titled "The Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication," which includes 15 in-depth interviews with and 40 questionnaires completed by students at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

entails a political program broadly aligned with Dewey's pragmatist democratic ideal to promote social conditions in which progressively more inclusive, participative, critically reflexive communication practices can flourish." The ethical commitment of this proposal advances the idea that democratic and pluralistic values can flourish from reflecting and understanding our communicative practices from different points of view.

As in the situation suggested by the quotation at the beginning of this essay, these problematic interactions are often related to issues of autonomy (if individuals perceive they need more or less independence), openness (if individuals feel they would have to disclose more or not disclose so much) and predictability (if the relationship seeks innovation or routineness) (Baxter, 1990). The application of the metamodel to communicative problems found in our everyday talk is based on the principle that "it is good to be able to reflect on a situation from different points of view, considering the implications of different problem descriptions" (Craig, 2009, p. 9). Craig's constitutive metamodel gives us resources for reflecting on communication problems, a first step for the resolution of conflicts. From this point of view, the constitutive metamodel and its traditions of thought provide resources for reflecting on communication problems, which is a modest first step in the resolution of conflicts, because the way we think and talk about communication simultaneously constructs our own communicative actions and processes.

How we talk about communication (practical or ordinary metadiscourse/metacommunication) depends on the cultural contradictions of our time (Hofstede, 1980) and the dialectical tensions of personal interactions (Baxter, 1990). The use of metatheory for analyzing how we talk about communication and highlighting at the same time different ways of thinking about our conflictive interactions is an example of how theoretical (the scientific discourses about communication) and practical (the ordinary way of talking about communication) metadiscourses influence each other (Craig, 1999). Together they conform metadiscourse,

> A place where the discourses about communication (ordinary, academic, theoretical, journalistic. . .) take place. That is why communication theory is not just a discourse for explaining society[;] it is a discourse in society and contributes to the evolution of communication practices that constitute society (Craig, 2010).

From this point of view, theoretical metadiscourse envisioned as a practical art that offers resources for people to better understand and improve their ordinary metadiscourse. The PMC, which is articulated on three levels (culture, dialectical tensions and metadiscourse), is a practical way for explaining and analyzing how we talk about communication in interpersonal relationships, how our talk makes sense within specific cultural and dialectical contexts, and how the traditions of thought are practical resources for us to re-think our conflictive interactions from different points of view.

The main goal of this essay is thus to develop a model of communication that advances the traditions of thought in order to solve conflictive interactions in our everyday life.

2. Metacommunication as a practical art

Metatheoretical approaches are often used in an epistemological dimension, above all, for the organization of scientific knowledge (its limitations, analytical perspectives on the object(s) of study, etc.). In the case of the field of communication, theoretical metacommunication, that is, the scientific discourses about communication, has been used as a way of organizing this field and consolidating, at the same time, its scientific identity

(Galindo Cáceres, 2008; Garcia-Jimenez, 2007). However, theoretical metadiscourse can be a useful tool for the study of communication in all its levels (interpersonal, group, organizational, mass media, and public opinion) because it is a practical art. From this point of view, metatheory of communication is not just a theory of theories but a corpus of knowledge that can make first-level analysis on social symbolic practices:

> The constitutive model of communication as metamodel proposes that communication be more than an explanandum, that is, something that ought to be explained by our models or theories, but that it also be considered an explanans, that is, something that explains how our world is what it is and how it functions (Cooren, 2012, p. 2).

The constitutive metamodel, proposed by Craig in the article Communication theory as a field (1999)," is a landmark article" (Cooren, 2012, p. 2) and arguably one of the most referenced papers in communication research in the last decades.[2] Up to now, most of the developments based on the CM have mainly focused on its epistemological contributions (Martín Algarra, 2009; Myers, 2001; Russill, 2008) and less on its pragmatic application (Cooren, 2012). In this sense, Cooren (2012, p. 13) reminds us that communication theory as metadiscourse should be understood as

> a practical endeavor, capable of providing conceptual resources for reflecting on real, everyday social, political, and ethical problems. In the midst of the turmoil that this planet and its population (human and nonhuman) are currently experiencing, whether in Russia, Syria, Egypt, or elsewhere, we, as communication scholars, should show that our traditions have something to say about what is happening in the world.

Craig's paper accomplished important epistemological and practical goals in the field of communication. First, from an epistemological point of view, it organized knowledge about communication by means of a constitutive metamodel that included the most important traditions of thought that historically have analyzed communication (semiotic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, critical, phenomenological, and cybernetic). Second, this metamodel in a practical sense proposed different ways of talking and thinking about communication and, therefore, different ways of understanding our social practices. CM showed ways of talking about communication not just in a scientific way, but also in an ordinary way.

3. The Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication and its levels

PMC is a new theoretical and methodological proposal for analyzing interpersonal communication. It is based on several preliminary studies about metacommunication, culture, and interaction. Firstly, it is based on studies that have developed the metatheory of communication and its traditions of thought (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999; Martín Algarra, 2009; Myers, 2001; Russill, 2008). Secondly, it is based on literature that has outlined cultural trends (or cultural values) and the limitations of these kinds of theoretical approaches because of the dynamism and complexity of culture (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Cray & Mallory, 1998; Fougere & Moulettes, 2007; Goodwin, 1999; Gudykunst

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[2] It is one of the most referenced articles in the field of communication since its publication in 1999. Specifically, among the journals with a higher impact factor (Communication Theory, Journal of Communication, Communication Monographs, Communication Research, and Human Communication Research), "Communication theory as a field" is the 23rd most referenced article among 4048 articles published in those journals from 1999 to 2012.