



AN OVERVIEW OF MAJOR MICROSOCIOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

Pregled glavnih mikrosocioloških doprinosa u polju Sociologije komunikacije

ABSTRACT: *Communication as a basic and ubiquitous phenomenon for social life is part of the researcher's interest in almost every field of social science and especially in sociology, psychology and communication studies. In doing so, each scientific discipline apprehends communication from the perspective of the method it employs and from the researchers' imagination and theoretical preferences, which is mainly based on locally acquired knowledge and experiences. In this article we will focus our attention on the most important aspects and perspectives set forth by sociological theorization and analysis.*

KEYWORDS: Social action, communicative action, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology

APSTRAKT: Komunikacija kao osnovna i sveprisutna pojava u društvenom životu je deo istraživačkih interesovanja u gotovo svakom polju društvenih nauka, a posebno u sociologiji, psihologiji i komunikologiji. Realizujući ova istraživanja, svaka naučna disciplina obuhvata komunikaciju iz perspektive svog metoda i iz istraživačeve imaginacije i teorijske preferencije, što je uglavnom zasnovano na lokalno stečenom znanju i iskustvu. U ovom članku svoju pažnju koncentrišemo na najvažnije aspekte i perspektive koje su zadale sociološka teorija i analiza.

KLJUČNE REČI: društvena akcija, komunikacijska akcija, simbolički interakcionizam, fenomenologija, etnometodologija

Introduction

Modern sociology analyzes communication as a constitutive and binding element of society, seen as an organized structure of individuals and isolated social actors. The way communication enables the constitution, functioning and

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interpretation of social life is one of the central topics of interest in sociology. But awareness of the importance of communication in researching social life has not always existed. This awareness is socially conditioned, has developed along with the increasing significance of microsociology at the expense of macrosociology and has grown from the beginnings of the 20th century to the present. The classical concept of social action developed in the 1920s can be considered as the fundamental idea fostering the divergence between these two competing perspectives in the study of social reality. In developing this concept, Max Weber proposed that social action should be the basic subject of sociological research, and that the constituting elements of social life, including communication, should be seen as form of social action. Hence the interest of sociologists to research communication as social action.

Communication as social action

As is well known, social action is an action taken by social actors, which takes into account other members of society and is directed towards them (Weber 1978: 4). Action that is not aimed at others or which does not take into account other social actors cannot be considered a social action. Social action is an active part of social reality. It is an initiative part of social dynamics. As Turner (2006: 1) notes, jumping is a social action, while being pushed is a social event. Social action includes the registration of the behavior of other social actors, as well as the subjective interpretation given to them, and hence social action has a reflexive dimension (Kalberg 2003: 142). In particular, it is an action in accordance with the interpretations of social actors and events. Social action involves the anticipation of the events and behaviors of the past, but it also projects onto expected and desired future events and behaviors of social actors. Accordingly, social action can be motivated by the expectation and projection of past, present and future events and behaviors of other social actors.

Sociologists see communication as a social action that is aimed at mutual understanding with other social actors through the exchange of symbols (Mead 1934; Habermas 1983). Every communication is a social action, but every social action does not necessarily equate to communication, although the lack thereof would largely make the social action senseless. Communication is not possible without social action that is, without it being oriented toward another social actor. Social action, in contrast to communication, does not necessarily include mutual understanding. Therefore communication is a certain kind of social action. Understanding of social action is based on the meaning that social actors give to their social actions. While meaning is characteristic of social action, the understanding of action is characteristic of communication. It can be said that social action is a necessary condition without which there can be no communication, but it is not a sufficient condition for enabling communication. Something that has begun as a social action for various reasons does not necessarily have to end with the mutual understanding of social actors, i.e., to transform into communication.

In light of the competition between macrosociology and microsociology, social action as it was conceived by Weber gave room to be analyzed from the microperception of the social actor. Moreover, social action was further developed from the perspective of historical macroperception. That conception was later used by Parsons (1962), who developed his famous and very influential theory of voluntary action in which communication was analyzed as a special kind of social coordination among social systems. According to Parsons, social action is composed of several interconnected social acts. Social action is taken on the basis of preferred goals and the orientation for their realization (Parsons 1962). Social actors who implement social goals can act individually or collectively. For Parsons, communication is a social action that involves relationships between at least two social actors, each of which adapts to the expectations of the other. The mutual understanding, adaptation and agreement are of key importance for communication. At the same time, Parsons puts emphasis on communication between social systems, neglecting the analysis of communication at the interpersonal level. In the analysis of communication between systems, Parsons includes factors such as loyalty, influence, power, or money.

In the shadow of the dominant theory of volunteer action, several microsociological theories appeared elaborating their own analysis of communication as social action. Hence, communication became over time an increasingly important topic both in sociology and in the social sciences. Thus, symbolic interactionism analyzed communication as a symbolic action, phenomenology analyzed communication as a social action through which one gains conscious experience, ethno-methodology analyzed communication as a practical action, social constructionism analyzed communication as the basic component of the social world of social actors, and theory of the communicative action tried to isolate communication from other types of social actions, indicating its historical development in the wider social context at particular time intervals. All these theories fostered the emergence of new perspectives on communication seen as social action. We will first analyze communication as a joint action, to then briefly consider the perspectives from which individual sociological theories analyzed communication and their implications for the theorizing of communication.

Communication action as a joint action

As Blumer (2004: 70) defined it, a joint action is a larger collective form of action, constituted by the fitting together of more than one individual's behavior, such as dinners, trading, weddings. Communication as a joint action is composed of several social acts. Thus, Mead (1934: 42) interprets gestures as social acts which unfold into an action, without being separated from the common action, but serving as stimulants. Accordingly, gestures as social acts are not independent, nor do they precede joint action, but on the contrary they are an integral part of it.

Communication as a social action can also be analyzed as a set of social acts such as speaking and listening that are interconnected, as they interact with one another to the extent that social actors communicate in synchronized speaking, and listening to the responses of the other participants, i.e., social actors that communicate with each other are simultaneously both speakers and listeners. Although in principle, there should be no hierarchy amongst individual social acts, the focus of the social sciences has long been on the analysis of speaking as a social act (Austin 1962).

The first major attempt to analyze speech as a social act was made by Austin (1962) who developed speech act theory. According to Austin, the speech act is a performance and as such it is composed by perform and act. As understood by Austin, the function of a speech is, above all, to allow for the expression of the social subject, through two dimensions: the locative and the dislocative dimension. While the locative dimension refers to the literal meaning of the words used, the dislocative dimension particularly insists on the metaphorical, transmissive dimension of the speech act. Thus, the locative dimensions of the question „Where are the keys?“ is engaged in searching for them, while the dislocative dimension engages with the reasons the understanding reasons behind my question, the circumstances that led me to displace my keys, and the consequences of locating them.

Austin's theory was later developed by Searle John (1999), who honored Austin especially for noticing the difference between the locative and the dislocative acts. But Searle made a serious distinction between language as a set of symbols and speech as the embodiment of those symbols in social life. This distinction was particularly convincingly shown by the founder of structuralist linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure (2006), according to whom speech is a conscious act of expression of thought, while language is an unconscious, impersonal and passive entity that social actors adopt, but it is very difficult to change. Therefore, Saussure, much like Austin and Searle, paid much more attention to speech than language. The linguist de Saussure, again like both philosophers, felt that speech cannot be reduced to a combination of symbols, but it is a performance that includes demands, promises, apologies, and so on. Mead's position on this question is similar (Blumer 2004: 18–21). But Mead put more attention on the process of internalization of language which according to him is an evolutionary process that goes along with the evolution of gestures in symbols, forming through that process the mind of social actors. Mead calls this process of *adoption of the objective structure of meaning through communication with others* subjectivization. So subjectivization is a process in which we adopt dominant concepts in language as our own; or a dominant value system as our own value system. Mead distinguishes between the normative structure, which is an integral part of language and the pragmatic aspect of the speech action. This dichotomy was analyzed by Habermas (1998) by developing the concepts of universal pragmatism and formal pragmatism. Moreover, universal pragmatism refers to the meanings and metaphorical function of speech, while formal pragmatism is devoted to the evaluation of the linguistic competency of social actors in communication.

According to Cooke (1998: 1–2) Habermas, unlike Austin and Searle, emphasizes the importance of formal pragmatism by insisting on conditions that need to be met by respecting the formal rules of spoken language. But, according to Scharp (2003: 5), the achievement of mutual understanding in communication goes beyond the boundaries of formal pragmatism, i.e., the purely formal rules of speaking, and extends to the meanings that the words or even sentences carry with them as a subject of analysis of universal pragmatism.

As Pusey (2003: 76) notes, that which was a combination of speaking and acting for Austin and Searle, was seen as communicative action for Habermas. In that sense, even though Habermas recognizes Austin and Searle's contribution in redefining communication as not only instrumental but also performative, he is critical towards what he considers to be an overly superficial analysis of communication failing to analyze understanding as a major characteristic of communication. For Habermas himself, by satisfying the conditions of formal validity, which includes understanding, speech is spilled into communication, that is, formal pragmatism is infused into universal pragmatism. Ethnomethodologists, for their part, were also placed before the dilemma for analyzing the formal versus informal speech. According to them, special attention should be paid to the analysis of the ordinary informal speech in everyday communication, which is much freer than formal speech and which enables the coordination of social life (Hester and Francis 2004: 8–9).

The transformation of communication from action to interaction

The analysis of social action as a joint action involves the interaction of multiple social actors in a given social context, which could be defined as an interaction. This transition from the analysis of the action of one toward the other social actors, to the analysis of the mutual reaction of the social actors made within the framework of symbolic interactionism also meant a transition to the analysis of communication as a form of social interaction. It can be said that social interaction through communication involves the coordination of social actions. While the key feature of social action is the meaning attached to defining the situation in which it operates, in the interaction the emphasis is placed on the relation that is required to be established at the moment when two actors act simultaneously addressing one another.

When Mead proposes interaction as an object of sociological analysis, among other things in the analysis of communication, he insists that social interaction is constitutive in relation to social action, and is not consisting of it. In our analysis, this would mean that relations generate meanings. More specifically, this means that while social interaction involves the coordination of social actions, social actions do not constitute social interaction, but rather social interaction constitutes social actions. This means that the relations between social action and social interaction are much more complicated, ambivalent and stratified. It could even be claimed that in Mead's theory, the action and the interaction are

in a sort of symbiosis, unified one with another. Hence, social action itself is a sort of cooperation between social actors, where everyone enters with their predispositions and capacities taking over responsibilities for accomplishment of certain joint goals. These goals can be planned (i.e. explicitly set), spontaneous or unconscious (i.e. implicitly set). When social action occurs within social groups, it is related to the acting of the group. But the life of social groups cannot be relied upon a simple number of social actions, it is a lot more than that. For this reason Blumer (2004:70) uses the term “joint action”.

Symbols denote certain objects and states, as well as their characteristics and qualities. Accordingly, we can make a distinction between the world of subjects, i.e., social actors who attach meaning and the world of objects to which meanings are given. According to Mead objects are socially conditioned, which is the result of symbolic interactions (Mead 1934). Phenomenology, as a philosophical direction accepted in the social sciences, especially in sociology and psychology, tried to overcome this division of the object and subject, by introducing into the analysis, the conscious experience that was investigated by using the method of phenomenological reduction. Consciousness is awareness of something. It unites the subject who gives meaning, who thinks, shows emotions, believes, etc. and the object to which meaning is given, which is thought, toward which emotions are shown and that in which one believes. But such a subject that relies solely on the individual conscious experience is isolated within the social context. That is why sociologists who embraced the phenomenology of social life engaged in solving the puzzle of objectivization of knowledge. Objectification of knowledge, conditioned by several elements for which particular concepts were developed and which according to them took place in the process of communication.

The phenomenological approach to communication

In an attempt to objectify knowledge that is internalized by social actors, phenomenology has built up several concepts as prerequisites for communication, which overcome the isolation of the individual conscious experience: typification – the process of marking things; stock of knowledge – a concept of collective unconscious, i.e., the language in which our collective experience is imprinted and intersubjectivity – an inter-space that floats among individuals (Schultz 1973).

Typification can be defined as the classification of knowledge and its meanings. . In our consciousness, names are associated with given objects. Giving the meanings (meaning) of objects is most often associated with the names that are attached to certain objects. In our consciousness, the names of things are related to the objects they represent. The source of this relationship is experience. Transcribing Schultz’s opinion, Rogers (2003: 361–362) states that typification is a process that includes:

- The experience we have with a given kind of objects. The applicative character of experience implies awareness of the experience with given objects
- Objects have certain repetitive features. Social actors extract those characteristics of objects and associate them with their name

- Thetypification refers not only to the process of marking (naming) of objects, but also to the results of that process that are reflected in the use of names from social actors

The typification process is central to communication, through which social actors practically engage in the social world. Namely, through typification, children learn how a certain combination of sounds is associated with certain entities and appearances. In a similar way they learn how certain typifications serve as a formula that leads to social action.

The stock of knowledge is a collection of collective knowledge and experiences that constitute collective consciousness. It is built through communication with other members of society in a variety of social arrangements such as family, friends, colleagues from work, etc. (Guff, Sharrock and Francis 2005: 154).

Social actors use a stock of knowledge, depending on the situation in which they are located and the needs that they should meet at a given moment. As Schultz (1973: 75–76), noted the use of stock of knowledge by social actors is incoherent and only partly clear. Incoherent because individual aspirations, plans, and interests are not integrated into a coherent system. Accordingly, the knowledge that social actors have is only partially organized in the form of plans for life, work, rest, etc. It is partly clear, because people rarely and most often, by exception, are interested in completely clearing up any uncertainties in knowledge, and the principles on which things work. Simultaneously, knowledge is not used consistently. Namely, incompatible attitudes can be equally useful and used by social actors depending on the context they are in.

Intersubjectivism is the space of recognizable and understandable symbols. That space floats among social actors. It's based on the typification and stock of knowledge and enables communication. Through intersubjectivity, phenomenologists have tried to overcome the difference between the individual experience of the social actors and the experience of the social group, enriching the individual consciousness of social actors with the wider social empirical knowledge and experience of social group that is achieved through communication. In the analysis of intersubjectivism, certain differences can be observed between classical phenomenology and its sociological reading. Namely, while for Husserl, intersubjectivism is an a priori characteristic of consciousness, for Schuidz the intersubjectivity as a characteristic of human consciousness is acquired in the processes of socialization (Flagerty 2009: 222). The intersubjective world is not limited to the knowledge and experience of individual social actors, but it becomes a single social world that includes all members of society, extending into the time continuum. Thus, intersubjectivism links knowledge, meanings, understandings of past, current situations, and expectations of the future, giving space for social actors to have a subjective perspective of observing things in the common, inter-subjective social world.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) were strongly influenced by phenomenology and, in particular, Schultz and Phenomenology of Social Life, which they themselves recognize in the introduction to Social Construction of Reality. In

fact, Schultz was the mentor of the doctoral work of Berger. Flaherty (2009: 226) concludes that social constructivism is one of the areas in which phenomenology is applied. Berger and Luckman, borrowing from Schultz, developed ideas about the importance of experience, the stock of knowledge and typification, but especially intersubjectiveness. Berger and Luckmann (1991) understood the intersubjectivity as reciprocity and sharing of subjective experiences. In this way, intersubjectivity contributes to the objectivization of the subjective reality of individuals. According to Berger and Luckmann (1991: 71) through communication, the subjective experiences of individuals are shared, mixed, intertwined, and thus form an objectified dimension of the reality of everyday life, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

“I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real to others as it is to myself. Indeed, I cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others. I know that my natural attitude to this world corresponds to the natural attitude of others, that they also comprehend the objectifications by which this world is ordered, that they also organize this world around the 'here and now' of their being in it and have projects for working in it” (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 37).

The analysis of communication within individual sociological theories pointed to its significance for certain aspects of social life, but according to some authors like Habermas, sociology omitted to deal with the key feature of communication, which, according to him, is the understanding among social actors (Habermas 1987: 4–5).

The macrosociological consequences of communication action in the invisible rules of social life

Focused on a microsociological analysis of communication, Habermas delved into a macro level of analysis, which he also applied to communication. Habermas used the theory of communicative action as a platform for a critique of capitalism through the criticism of the instrumental action which, according to Weber, is the basis for the development of the capitalist socio-historical formation. Habermas thus insisted on a dichotomy: instrumental target-oriented action and communicative action oriented towards understanding (Habermas 1983).

Communication action is primary in the sense that people first understand through communication, and subsequently develops instrumental action in which communicator uses interlocutor as an instrument. Moreover, Habermas, in contrast to other left-wing thinkers that criticized the rationality of the instrumental target-oriented social action as Horkheimer and Adorno (Ingram 1990: 63, defined the communicative action as a rational action, by modifying the criterion according to which the rationality of social action is determined (Habermas 1983:10). Thus, according to Habermas, the rationality criterion

of social action is the link between mind and knowledge. Accordingly, rational action is not only the relation between the goal and the tools for its achievement, but rational action can be oriented towards the understanding of any symbols. As Habermas noted, the difference between instrumental and communicational rationality is the difference between „to know-how“ and „to know-that“ (Habermas 1983:8). Accordingly, it is not only rational people who can complete a specific task, but also people who skillfully know how to use the language. Although his attempt to rationalize social action was subjected to severe criticism (Heath 2003), he nevertheless made a serious contribution to the understanding of communicative action. The rationalization process, according to Habermas, takes place in the historical continuum. In the mythical-magic society, the words have magic properties and there is no difference between communicative action and target oriented rational action (Habermas 1983: 48). This difference begins even in the process of demythologization of societies that entail the denaturalization of society and the de-socialization of nature, which separates man from nature and establishes the structure of formal understanding of things. Following its rationalization the relationship between subjects and objects (the names and meanings they carry with them) was replaced by the relationship between speech and the world (the truth of what is being said). The validity of this link between speech and the world was confirmed by a mix of practical concepts like causality.

Ethno-methodologists who were preoccupied with the analysis of the invisible rules of social life in their analysis particularly referred to communication as a practical action through which such rules are applied by shaping the social order. In doing so, practical action is any action that social actors take in their everyday lives, with the meaning they give to them. Speech is of particular importance as a medium used for the establishment of a social order. This order, *inter alia*, implies constellations of power in the interaction between social actors and applies in the establishment of knowledge, as well as the conditions under which the understanding between social actors is achieved. Communication can be said to not only establish, but also legitimize the rules of the social order.

Ethno-methodologists with their experiments wanted to just expose the invisible rules of the social order to the insight. Therefore, ethno-methodology suggests a three-step method for exploring practical action (Hester and Francis 2004: 25–26). The first step is breaking the rules of everyday life, the second step is to observe the visible characteristics of social rules when they are violated and the third step is to observe the attempt to reconstruct the social order. Communication is the form in which these rules of everyday life exist. As communication is momentarily and constantly changing, the rules are momentary, constructed, and reconstructed at every moment in which the communication takes place.

Garfinkel and Sacks (1986: 159) emphasized the importance of membership in the group both for co-payment and for the observation of everyday life, which provides a set of pre-knowledge that gives logical and understandable meaning

to communication. In the words of Garfinkel (1967: 39–40), understanding the meaning of communication is much more dependent on what has not been said, but it should have been, than from what has been said.

The analysis of the conversation within ethno-methodology was so significant that over time, conversation analysis began to stand out as an autonomous discipline within ethno-methodology. Although conversation analysis had its beginnings in ethno-methodology, and the founder of the same Sacks, was one of the closest collaborators of the intellectual leader of ethnography Garfinkel, the relations between these two disciplines were ambivalent. On one hand, there were allegations that ethno-methodologists were trying to keep the conversational analysis under their own patronage (Willson 2003), while on the other hand accusations were made that the conversation analysis is not researching invisible rules of social life (ten Have 2004:25).

Conversational analysis distinguishes between formal and informal (practical) language. While informal language is less structured and coordinates, more closely, the interaction between social actors. Hester and Francis (2004: 8–9) note that conversational analysis does not involve the analysis of abstract, but of practical language. In the analysis of practical language, social context is important as well as to be a member of the group. The relations between social context and communication are complex. On the one hand, the social context conditions and leads the conversation; on the other hand, conversation can contribute to the creation or redefinition of the social context (Garfinkel 1967: 39–40). Being a member of the group is important because it provides foreknowledge from which the meaning of the conversation can be understood. Membership in the group gives us information about the relationship between social actors, their history, their characteristics, character traits, etc. For understanding the conversation itself, that which is not said is often more important, than what is said. Garfinkel and Sacks (1986: 164) present the following illustrative example: while not belonging to a group, we can still understand the semantic meaning of a simple sentence such as „she did not like it here and we left“. But as we are not members of the group, we do not have the necessary foreknowledge to understand who *she* is, why they did not like it, who are *we* exactly, etc.

Conclusions

In many ways, this brief journey through the complexity of issues in situations of interaction, the role of language activities, or the relationship between action contexts and social contexts will have to relativize some commonplaces often mentioned about communication. But above all, it will have led to experiencing the limits of certain dichotomous oppositions, which to this day, seem to be a law in some models of discourse. Ultimately, the choice of re-inscribing sociological research in Max Weber's tradition of comprehensive sociology has no effect on the falling back of sociological research on micro-social phenomena that would leave it out of all major social discussions. On the contrary, this choice seems to

open up to research the possibilities of generalizations, and which will at least have the advantage to rely on minute descriptions of the singular phenomena on which they are based. The key point that has always puzzled sociologists, and where they have no other means of understanding and analyzing social phenomena than those used by social actors to produce and recognize their activities, is not necessarily a nuisance. Once one proposes to recognize as systematically as possible the nature of these resources that belong to the very nature of social activity, we realize, as Weber had seen, that it is necessarily oriented towards others.

In this confrontation, we do find a few landmarks in the analysis of a situated interaction, but a deeper reconfiguration of the field of discourse analysis seems necessary. To overcome these limitations, a reconfiguration which presupposes, in particular, a better integration of the processes of representation and mediation of action, a finer description of the conceptual and procedural dimensions of the action, and a more explicit consideration of the multimodal character of discursive productions. These are all challenges for the future of a discipline, which ultimately constitute the methodological and epistemological conditions to which the theories of communication must submit in order to conceptualize effectively the relations between action, discourse and communication.

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