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Harmonizing Communication Outwards and Within. A Shift in Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Considering the current international context, where everybody is affected by the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic and its economic, social and psychological implications, communication has been subjected to complex changes at all levels, that go far beyond what we have managed to understand so far. Nowadays, in these troubled times, obstacles in communication are the norm rather than the exception, often resulting in alienation, anxiety, depression and a deep sense of loss. Loss of what our lives used to be... Loss of the self... This is why, once the impact of this new reality has more or less settled in, we need to work towards harmonizing communication in this new world we are living in. As linguists, we are witnessing an on-going shift in pragmatics and discourse analysis, as we should acknowledge the emergence of complex verbal and non-verbal dimensions to personal and professional communication, where fear of contagion is constantly lurking in the conscious or subconscious background. Special focus should be laid on schools and the entire educational process, with electronic platforms and online teaching/learning causing additional stress to all parties involved (teachers, students, and families of both categories). We have already discovered that the lack of proper human interaction, or the diminished state we are experiencing it in, is literally impossible to replace or fully make up for. Now, we must understand that harmonizing communication must be a top priority, particularly if we need people to stay fully-functional and keep education, society and economy running.

Keywords: communication; barriers; manipulation; pragmatics; discourse analysis;

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication, regarded in all its complexity, has been around forever, long before man acknowledged its importance and far before we started analyzing its multi-layered influence on our lives. The need to communicate has sometimes pushed people beyond their physical limitations, and remains, to this day, a basic necessity of modern life. Considering the huge part communication plays nowadays in making sure the world keeps spinning, we may rightfully say that these are dark times, perhaps the darkest so far, for what communication should have meant at this point, with everything it entails.

In the current international context, where everybody is affected by the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic and its economic, social and psychological implications, we can easily see that communication has been subjected to complex changes at all levels, that go far beyond what we have managed to understand so



far. As we need to focus on the epidemiological dimension of the issue at hand in order to make sure we survive, there is another part of us that we must make time to tend to: the need to communicate our thoughts, our mentalities, our dreams, our opinions, our cultures...ultimately, the need to communicate who we are, to communicate ourselves to others. Because in communicating ourselves we somehow receive confirmation that we are still here, we find proof that we are still us and that we just might outlive this perilous journey that we have forcibly been embarked upon.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Never before have people perceived so many obstacles in their attempts to communicate, and we may put this down to the pre-pandemic situation, where communication could easily be achieved via so many channels that we simply had to pick from. Not meeting face-to-face used to be an option, not a matter of prohibition or a result of the constant fear of contagion. Meeting online was exclusively dictated by efficiency, not by responsible attempts to protect oneself and the others. We first need to really understand that the world we live in has changed, most likely beyond our capability of restoring it to its previous state. The less we fight this concept, the closer we are to identifying the solutions that we are not even looking for at the moment. Simply because we are too busy trying to stay safe and survive this unequal fight against an invisible enemy.

But these many impediments in achieving genuine communication are not waiting for us, patiently, to look for the right solutions. At a time when the exception has become the norm, when we experience barriers in attempting to communicate everyday, we're slowly discovering that all these result in a sense of alienation and depression, in a deep sense of loss...Loss of the what our lives used to be...Loss of the self...Hence, the journey we must set off on is towards the self, with a view to mending it or helping it adapt to the new reality we are living in, as we need to harmonize communication within first, so as to be able to harmonize communication outwards. We need to adjust, and, why not, re-learn to communicate with ourselves before we envisage better ways of communicating with others.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

We are currently so deprived of the non-verbal, that we might only now acknowledge its true importance: we cannot help being hindered and annoyed at the lack of macro- and micro-behavioural markers (to be found in body language, gestures, face mimic) and at our impossibility to decode clothing and accessories (which often characterize either the speaker, or the audience, or the context in which communication takes place). Moreover, we cannot possibly make up for the absence of such an extra-linguistic element as "an autonomous behavioural marker – a gesture that has no other purpose but to indicate" the speaker's "feelings. As these autonomous behavioural markers are not deliberately used, they are rarely noticed by the people using them or by the people witnessing them." (Collet, 2011:11-12) Such a concept refers to gestures we make due to the covert influence of our subconscious, that are meant to either reinforce or contradict what we actually say. Thus, being able to see your interlocutor means having higher chances in decoding the correct message that they are sending, which may or may not correspond to the linguistic dimension of it. The receiver, in this case, when communication is hindered, can only decode the verbal, no longer having access to the non-verbal.

There is, however, an area where we are provided with all the right cues and markers: mass-media. We can neither deny people's ever-growing focus on them, nor pretend that we do not understand their part in everything that has been happening lately. With the media, we are talking about a different type of communication, namely one based mainly on manipulation.

Truth to be told, manipulation, in all its ever-growing complexity, has been around forever, since man first walked the Earth accompanied. And, whether we want to admit it or not, it has been, and always will be, a constant part of our everyday life. We manipulate people each day into doing what we want them to do, either for their own good (in our opinion, at least), or to satisfy our personal interests. There are many shades of grey regarding where a fine line should be drawn, from an ethical point of view, between positive and negative manipulation. There are many who say that there is no such thing as positive manipulation, since the very concept represents an infringement of somebody else's own will and capability of making their own decisions. But what happens when the greater good is at stake? In these troubled times we are experiencing, during this full-blown Sars-CoV-2 pandemic that has caused

unprecedented changes in our lifestyles, our societies, our economies, and in our very mentality, we are more vulnerable than ever to being manipulated for the greater good. Mention must be made, though, that this is merely a linguistic analysis, relying on a multi-layered approach, combining rhetoric, pragmatics, discourse analysis, socio-linguistics, semantics, etc. and related domains such as mass- and behavioural psychology, psychoanalysis, etc., not fertile ground for conspiracy theories. In simplistic terms, it is all about connecting the dots, noticing patterns, watching out for shifts in paradigm and analyzing their collective impact in the field of the verbal and the non-verbal.

There is no news in saying that both media and political discourses are highly manipulative, resorting to all sorts of loaded words, from emotional overtones to guiding inference and beyond. If we take into account Garber's definition of the term, "loaded tells a story of abundance, excess, danger and desire" (2012:1), and add the fact that, within discourse analysis studies, specialists proved that "some words are loaded with connotative associations that make them highly sensitive elements in public discourse, especially political and legal discourse" (Blackwell and Meijs, 2011: abstract), we can understand that loaded language is deliberately used to elicit a specific response in an interlocutor or particular audience, guiding them towards inferring the intended meaning or outcome. In this case, critical thinking plays a vital role in not becoming unwilling and/or unaware participants in this sometimes expertly thought-out ploy. Yet, in the troubled times we are experiencing during the current Sars-Cov-2 pandemic, all this takes on a new meaning, while a different type of responsibility has been attached to it. Still bracing after the original impact of the pandemic, and struggling to adapt to this new hindered communication, we need to pay extra attention to having our reality framed (pun intended). 'Framed' not only as part of a grammatical causative construction. 'Framed' as in being manipulated, more than ever, into internalizing emotional overtones and even becoming an unaware participant in disseminating loaded language ourselves. Fear of contagion and the need to communicate oneself to the world have been known to be used before as crowd-control factors, and the successful recipe has just been adapted to modern times and technology. Ready to be used again in the future.

And it is this future that we are responsible for, as we have already discovered that the lack of proper human interaction, or the diminished state we are experiencing it in, is literally impossible to replace or fully make up for. Now, we must understand that harmonizing communication must be a top priority, particularly if we need people to stay fully-functional and keep education, society and economy running. Resort to positive manipulation, if we must, but by no means as a result of an all-is-fair-in-love-and war mentality. Moreover, since we are tackling the issue of working towards building a better future, special focus must be laid on the educational systems, as it is within it that new generations are forged. As we all know, since the initial coronavirus outbreak, there has been a heated debate on the whole online teaching / learning concept, as well as on whether schools should remain open or not. The aspect we are interested in, from a pragmatic and discourse analysis perspective, refers to the former, particularly the impact that online teaching / learning platforms have had on all parties involved (students, parents, teachers). We can safely state that most of the actors involved in this delicate and complicated play had to learn as they went along, and even sometimes hide their frustrations at their initial lack of proper technical skills.

Indeed, the context provided everybody with enough inner and outer barriers to communication that would or did make them abandon ship: from lack of attention and distractions, to physical barriers (such as poor internet connection or blurred images), to the absence of non-verbal cues and feedback, and, even further, to psychological barriers (such as anger at the current situation, stress overload because of a combination of medical, personal and job-related reasons, or even low self-esteem, potentially brought about by living conditions or self-image perceptions that make students feel obliged to keep their cameras turned off). The issue is literally so complex that one does not know where to start mending the whole process. It's a potential pragmatic and critical discourse analysis nightmare.

Nevertheless, we already know that only those who adapt survive. Hence, once the impact of this new reality has more or less settled in, we need to work towards harmonizing communication in this new world we are living in. The sooner we start, the speedier the recovery, so to speak. And we need to understand that we must harmonize communication within, so that we might then harmonize communication outwards. We need to find our way to our new selves, who live in this new and difficult-to-accept world, we need to adapt and stop fighting the reality we are experiencing. Because we are fighting it, and this is easily noticeable at a linguistic level in all those instances where we resort to "I

can't believe it," or "This is bad. This is very bad," or "There's nothing we can do about it," or "How long will it be until things return back to normal?," etc., referring to a wide array of situations, such as the number of new Covid-19 cases every day, the more or less drastic measures that governments all over the world have resorted to, not being able to dine in a restaurant or go to the cinema, and so on. This is actually pragmatic proof that we are still not accepting that things may never go back to the way they used to be before the pandemic, and that we are different from the people we used to be before the pandemic, as well. In this respect, the greatest denial of them all, in my opinion, refers to the educational system that I am part of. This particular part of not making peace with reality, of denying, hence not even trying to find its few advantages is what's probably going to harm entire generations of students and teachers. I'm talking about the long-held and widely-acclaimed belief that online learning is not learning. Really?! Why? Then what is it exactly that we, teachers, have been doing, the many of us who poured their hearts and souls and financial resources into making sure that students of all ages still benefit from what school now looks like?

I must confess that I disagree with people claiming that schools are closed. The buildings are closed, yes. But the school is made up of students and teachers, and we are still here. Very much so. And I think it is high time we adapted and dropped the negative loaded discourse when it comes to discussing the issue. Just so that there might be no misunderstanding, I do believe that face-to-face communication is the best way to teach and learn. I miss my students, I miss interacting with them properly and getting instant non-verbal feedback, I miss the extra-curricular activities that used to be so much fun. But now it's more important to adapt, and to help students adapt to these new conditions, than waste our time defending a concept that cannot function right now, or that may even endanger our lives. The sooner we stop telling students (either as teachers, or as parents) that "this is not school," or that "you're never going to learn anything with all this online thing," the easier it will be for them to adapt and knowledge acquisition will once again be facilitated.

Context is, indeed, paramount from everyday activities to specialized discourse (such as politics and advertising). It is context that we primarily investigate in pragmatics and discourse analysis, it is context that we teach students is vital in decoding the correct understatement or stylistic value attached to a spoken or a written text. Then, why is it that we are not analyzing this whole online learning situation in the current context? If we had, we would not have wasted precious time in fighting a reality that has been forced upon us and that we see no way of changing in the near future. Why don't we understand, instead, that, verbally and non-verbally, we need to be there for our students and for our kids? Because, even if you can't see (all of) them, they can still see you (yes, I am one of those lenient teachers who refuse to oblige their students to turn their cameras on). And if you are there every day, if you keep teaching the same interactive way you always have, if you keep using jokes when they grow tired, if you make time to listen to them, even when they are not exactly talking about the subject you teach, then you have done more than you can imagine to preserve a part of that normality that everybody is talking about.

However, all these do mean that there is an on-going shift in pragmatics and discourse analysis, as a new type of communication is being forged. One where the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary, though hindered to various extents, are adapting to a new context of and to new parameters of the communicative act. We need only allow them their space and learn to use and manipulate their newly acquired functions and dimensions.

To this end, we may find great help in resorting to NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) and its various techniques and concepts. For example, if we think of the behavioural frames within NLP fundamental filters, we may discover that we can use the third frame to our advantage, namely feedback vs failure. According to O'Connor and Seymour, "there is no such thing as failure, there is only result. Results can be used as feedback, useful corrections, as a special opportunity to discover something you have overlooked. Failure is nothing but a way to describe an unwanted result. You can use the results obtained to refocus your efforts. Feedback helps you not lose track of your objective. Failure is a dead-end. The two terms are similar in their practical meanings, yet they symbolize two completely different thought patterns." (2019:31) This means that we need to rethink our failure to communicate face-to-face and reorganize our endeavours so as to make the best of online interaction. It all comes down to reframing our minds to adapt to this new electronic dimension that communication has acquired and manifesting it both verbally and non-verbally.

In this respect, when considering the educational system, we should acknowledge the fact that many more students can now attend online classes because they are no longer burdened with the additional financial strain of commuting or paying rent, if they live in other cities or countries. Along the same lines, although deprived of its rich and complex cultural exchange experience, Erasmus programs allow students to take part in courses provided by other universities without putting themselves in danger, health-wise, by travelling or by temporarily living in a foreign country where they have to pay extra for health insurance, especially during the current pandemic. Therefore, instead of having to give up the scholarship, they attend courses online, from the comfort and security of their own homes in their own countries. Hence, the sooner we understand and verbalize the fact that online learning is learning, the easier we will manage to turn failure into feedback. We need to become aware of what we can improve when teaching or learning online and channel our efforts in making such discoveries work in real life. And this holds valid far beyond the scope of the educational system. This is a time when we can use principles within pragmatics, CDA, and NLP to our positive manipulative purposes and start saying, loud and clear, that “online learning is really still learning,” that “having meetings online is still working and interacting,” that “online visits paid to friends is still keeping in touch,” just because the verbal is, or can be willed into becoming, a manifestation of the conceptual. We can even go as far as saying that we can alter the context to better serve our goals. Because we have already established that it’s all about the context. Yet, as stated earlier, this entire process must start from within, and we must first address our own pragmatic response to the pandemic and the changes it has entailed in our everyday personal and professional lives. We need to seriously address anxiety, depression, alienation, loss of the self. Only then, only after harmonizing communication within, both at a verbal and at a non-verbal level, will we be able to tackle the issue of harmonizing communication outwards, which would allow us to perform as functional individuals in society.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In other words, we may need to become our own NLP coaches, so that we might later coach others. In so doing, we must be aware of the fact that “an NLP coach expresses himself/herself along three dimensions: TO DO, TO KNOW, and TO BE. First, you have skills; make them function to achieve change. You develop [...] according to what you can DO. Then you learn new things and you enhance your knowledge; you develop [...] according to what you KNOW. Thirdly, which is the most important, you develop according to the way in which you become a model for” the others “by means of what you can BE.” (O’Connor and Lages, 2019:268) Thus, by resolving to act, we learn and acquire the knowledge that makes it possible for us to comprehend reality and accept it, in order to become and finally be the best versions of ourselves, even in difficult and challenging times.

Ultimately, now more than ever, we must resort to a combination of broadening our perspective in terms of genuine and intricate interdisciplinarity, i.e. blending various approaches into a complex response to the context at hand, and of using all the tools we are provided with in the realms of the verbal and the non-verbal, that would allow us to make sure communication, both within and outwards, is achieved to the best of our current abilities and capabilities.

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