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<https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.09.2.04>

The Communicative Construction of Reality and Sequential Analysis. A personal reminiscence¹

Abstract This paper presents a historical view of the emergence of what is known as the communicative paradigm. Through a personal reminiscence of his long career, Thomas Luckmann entangles the main sources of what was a radical shift of the role of language and communication in the humanities and social sciences. In doing so, Luckmann shows that the epistemological and ontological assumptions on which the contemporary study of social interaction and communicative processes rely were practically non-existent half a century ago. While sociology and linguistics seemed to exist in separate universes during Luckmann's student days, a dialogical approach to language and social life eventually appeared – for example, in ethnomethodology, conversational analysis and French structuralism – and laid the foundation to the (today taken for granted) idea that social realities are the result of human activities. Human social reality and the worldview that motivates and guides interaction are mainly constructed in communicative processes. If social reality is constructed in communicative interaction our most reliable knowledge of that reality comes from reconstructions of these processes. Such reconstructions have been greatly facilitated by technological innovation, such as tape- and video-recorder, which, alongside theoretical advancements, may explain the timing of the communicative turn. Finally, this paper marks the benefits of sequential analysis in enabling us to trace step-by-step the processes by which social reality is constructed and reconstructed.

Keywords Communicative Paradigm; Sociology; Linguistics; Social Realities; Sequential Analysis

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It stands to reason that the humanities and social sciences are more profoundly embedded in the society and culture of their time than the physical sciences. To be sure, all scientific activity is situated historically and culturally, but the humanities and social sciences are so situated in an additional sense. Their medium of communication is a particular language rather than

¹ My presentation is partly based on a lecture given at the symposium in honor of Per Linell in 2004 at the University of Linköping, and a later version presented at the University of Prague in 2009.

a universal algebra, and a particular language also constitutes the human reality investigated by them. They are, therefore, reflexive disciplines in a sense the physical sciences are not, and they are more directly influenced by the worldview of the society in which they are located. In their striving for objectivity and systematic accumulation of knowledge the humanities and social sciences must reckon with this inevitable circumstance.

When investigating and interpreting the history of national literatures, the organization of their local societies, laws, and economy, the humanities and social sciences tend to distinctly exhibit – in addition to paradigmatic traditionalism – particularistic traits. Even the disciplines that try to penetrate language and social life as universal aspects of the human condition, such as anthropology and sociology, tend to suffer from the same weakness. Modern social theory and the modern theory of language provide good examples for this observation. During the early stages of their formation, the major scholarly traditions of these theories, French, British, German, American, and Russian, followed somewhat different paths. Nonetheless, they did have two things in common beyond their subject matter. Contrary to what one would expect, and with few exceptions, they shared a lack of interest in the older traditions of the philosophy of language and social philosophy. Less surprisingly, they also ignored one another. One notable exception at the beginning of the twentieth century was the Durkheim-Meillet collaboration at the *Année Sociologique*, another, more general one, could be found in German and American ethnology. However, in these two countries ethnology was less closely connected to sociology than in France.

The mutual avoidance of sociology and linguistics is rather difficult to explain. After all, a systematic connection between the theory of language and the theory of society had been proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early decades of the nineteenth century.² For various reasons, Humboldt's thought exerted only a limited influence during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Traces of his thinking can be found in the mainly German investigations of semantic fields, and in the American Sapir-Whorf simplification, even distortion of Humboldt in the so-called linguistic relativity hypothesis. Both had a static, correlational outlook, quite the contrary of Humboldt's emphasis on language as communicative process.

The situation changed strikingly in the relatively short time of my academic career, from when I was a student to this day. As a living witness to this change, I may be allowed to reflect on these changes in a personal perspective. Looking back, I feel that I am justified in saying that the change was profound; with some slight exaggeration one might call it a paradigm shift. I can testify to the fact that here is a world of difference between what was taken for granted in my student days in linguistics and in sociology, as well as social psychology, and the assumptions on which we rely today in the study of social interaction and communicative processes.

In the late forties, when I began studying comparative linguistics in Europe, the dominant ap-

² The introduction to his study of the Kawi language, *On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*, was published posthumously in 1836. Humboldt, although no dwarf, was standing on the shoulders of giants, Vico, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Hamann, Herder.

proach was either philological in the old sense or what appeared as abstract structuralism to an impatient student who was looking in vain for *la parole* in the study of *la langue*. Arriving in the United States of America at the beginning of the fifties, I still took a Master's degree in philosophy, but then switched to sociology. As a student of Alfred Schütz, I was spared indoctrination in structural functionalism, which appeared to me to be just as far removed from social life as the dominant trend in linguistics seemed removed from the uses of language. Structural functionalism, as the widely accepted theory of society, and structuralism, as well as, somewhat later, generative grammar as the reigning approaches to language, seemed both static and abstract, remote from social reality and human communication. To use Humboldt's own terminology, they were concerned with the *εργον* [ergon = work] rather than the *ενεργεια* [energeia = energy] of language and social life. Given the nature of the reality they studied, I was also disappointed to see that sociology and linguistics were not closely connected, in fact, it seemed that they existed in separate universes. Although I retained a strong interest in the uses and functions of language in human social life even after becoming a sociologist, I was struck by the fact that sociology in general, and even what then went by the label of a sociology of language, was linguistically naïve to the point of ignorance. At the same time, the notions of social interaction and social structure in linguistics, even in the budding sub-discipline of pragmatics, were of a very modest home-grown variety. Half a century ago, this state of affairs was taken for granted by most practitioners in the two disciplines.

It is not my purpose to detail the changes in the two fields and the concurrent rapprochement between certain, by no means negligible, parts of the disciplines involved. I should like to point to the main sources of the change, however, the shift to what has been variously called the communicative paradigm.³ I am not quite sure how developments in linguistic pragmatics contributed to the change in the relationship of language theory and social theory. The verdict on a direct influence on empirical studies of Wittgenstein, who was much quoted, especially in some conversational analytic quarters, must remain open. So-called speech-act theory, also much quoted, was far removed from the realities of communication.

Another, somewhat older, source of this change, had a direct connection to Humboldt. Curiously enough, Humboldt's thought had not been neglected in Russia as much as elsewhere. The main proponent of Humboldt's thought was Aleksandr Potebnja.⁴ Through him Humboldt's influence reached Bakhtin, the formalists, and Roman Jakobson. The Western "discovery" of Bakhtin-Vološinov's emphasis on dialogue and genre in their philosophy of language and culture decidedly contributed to a change in the prevailing orthodoxies.

The proponents of a dialogical approach to language and social life were no longer ignored. In

³ My review of the sociology of language for the *Handbuch der empirischen Sozialforschung*, edited by René König, contains a relatively detailed account. The revised version of 1979 took note of many more changes in theory and research than my contribution to the first edition in 1969. Yet, while I reviewed the work of Vygotsky, Goffman, Gumperz and Hymes, Garfinkel, Sacks, Schegloff, and others, Bakhtin and Vološinov were still missed by me even then.

⁴ Aleksandr Potebnja, *Mysl' i jazyk*, Moscow 1862 (see Lachmann 1997).

France, first in the work of Lévi-Strauss and then in that of Pierre Bourdieu, the seeds sown in the Durkheim-Meillet connection bore belated fruit. Another early source of the change, about forty years ago, was the program of an ethnography of communication proposed by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes. About the same time, the work of Alfred Schütz fed two other sources that directly and indirectly helped to establish the communicative paradigm in social theory. One was ethnomethodology and its offspring, conversational analysis, and the other was the "new" sociology of knowledge, with one of its offsprings, communicative genre theory. Suffice it to say that what you are thinking and doing today would have been unthinkable when Garfinkel was a student of Parsons, corresponding with Schütz, about the time when I was a student of Schütz.

What, then, are the assumptions which we take for granted in our investigations to such an extent that they appear trivial now, and which would have met with puzzlement or rejection then?

Social reality is not *simply* presented to observation, if observation is defined naturalistically. "Objectivity" and "measurement" in the social sciences do not mean precisely the same thing as in the physical sciences. The physical sciences seek to explain a cosmos which has nothing to say – except in a purely metaphorical sense. It is a world to be looked at, described, and explained "objectively." The social sciences, on the other hand, investigate a world which *has* something to say, which, in fact, was saying something long before there were any scientists listening. The social world is naturally artificial, to use a term introduced by Helmuth Plessner.⁵ The

⁵ See: Plessner (1964; 1975[1928]).

traditions of life by which human societies are organized are an inter-subjective accomplishment. They are the "naturally artificial" result of long chains of interaction by "naturally artificial" human beings.

Although the human species did evolve naturally, of course, the human social worlds are not a direct evolutionary product; they are the products of something that *emerged* from evolution and is subject to its own level of causation. Human *history* is self-made. Traditions and institutions are not genetic programs. They are constructed in social interaction, and once they become established in the collective memory of a society, they are again transmitted in interaction. Traditions and institutions may appear less tangible than buildings and artifacts, but they are equally real.

In sum, historical stocks of knowledge and historical institutions are constructed, maintained, transmitted, transformed, and occasionally destroyed in social interaction. Obviously, social interaction is more than individual action, but it presupposes individual action, action that is meaningful to those who engage in them, whether it leads to results that were intended, or, painfully, when the consequences of interaction differ from those that were originally anticipated.

Evidently, the meaning of individual action is essentially subjective – yet, most of it is derived from social stocks of knowledge, which are built up in communicative social interaction. Social interaction consists of coordinated, interlocking individual actions. Individual action, in its turn, presupposes intentional activities whose meaning is mainly derived from social stocks of knowledge.

The idea that social reality is a human historical “accomplishment” is not new. It was anticipated by a long line of philosophers and historians, from Aristotle and Thucydides, to Vico, Montaigne and Montesquieu, and further to Adam Smith and Marx, to mention the most important ones. Nonetheless, a comprehensive formulation of this idea had to wait until the twentieth century. Max Weber, and after him Alfred Schütz, and after them others, among them Peter Berger and I, took up the main epistemological and methodological issues connected with it. Building upon their views, I shall look at the relationship between individual and collective levels of reality, at the links between action, knowledge, and the communicative construction of social worlds.

Before coming to that, I may briefly anticipate the basic methodological conclusion from these observations. Apart from the details of the epistemological question *how* “data” are to be constructed, and the ontological question from *what* they are constructed, there should be a basic agreement on the basic principle of ontological realism: that social realities are the result of human activities. The data of the social sciences are derived from these realities. Because they were constructed in meaningful social actions in a historical social world, they are to be *reconstructed* as data for the social sciences in a way that preserves rather than destroys their essential meaningfulness and historicity.

Nowadays, after the long dominant “positivist” era has come to an end, it seems to be widely accepted that “data” are “facta.” This means that “data” – whatever reality they may represent – are acknowledged to be communicative constructs. Given the peculiar nature of social reality

it is hardly surprising that there is no generally agreed answer either to the epistemological question precisely *how* or to the ontological question from *what* the data are constructed. Controversies about the way these questions should be answered were acute in the social sciences. However, the realistic position is that “data” are communicative constructs of the investigators based upon direct or indirect, for example, instrumentally mediated, observation. What is observed, however, are not simple, purely behavioral facts but social interaction, both direct and indirect, and its historical results.

Not all human activity is communicative in the usual sense of the word. Animals are hunted, fields are tilled, shelters are built, children are nurtured, enemies are fought. Yet, as these simple examples show, even what is not primarily communicative interaction, is usually facilitated and accompanied by it. Human social reality and the worldview that motivates and guides interaction *is* mainly constructed in communicative processes.

Reconstructions of social reality, a particular kind of data-producing activity in social science, are communicative acts by definition. Reconstructions are, of course, not restricted to the social sciences. They are a highly important communicative activity on the primary level of social discourse.⁶ Reconstructions of past events feed the collective memory of families, social groups and classes, institutions and entire societies.

If all that seems obvious, even trivial today, I should like to emphasize that it was anything

⁶ See: Bergmann and Luckmann (1995).

but that a little more than a generation ago. I have already tried to indicate the foremost theoretical reasons for the changes that led to the emergence of what has been called the communicative paradigm in sociology.

If social reality is constructed in communicative interaction, and if it is pervasive in social life, our most reliable knowledge of that reality comes from reconstructions of these processes. However, an elementary difficulty with the analysis of communicative interaction, as of all social interaction, is the transformation of communicative processes into data susceptible to analysis.⁷ This difficulty may explain why in the social sciences data of a different kind were preferred. As against the fleeting processes of interaction and communication their quasi-objective products appeared stable, thus, permitting both unhurried and verifiable analysis. The methodological preference in social science for art and artifacts, actuarial statistics and registers, documents, and other “material” objects, and for codable answers to interview questions was based on the assumption that action processes were beyond exact description and that the subjective components of ephemeral events were not objectifiable. The methodological bias which arose from the technical difficulty in pinning down the processes of social interaction came to distort the theoretical view of human reality.

Interestingly, the last link in the chain of events that changed markedly the assumptions and practices in the study of society and language during my own lifetime is not represented by a theoretical advance but by a technological innovation.

⁷ In the following I use some passages from my paper on the interpretation of dialogue (Luckmann 1999).

A precise analysis of the processes of social interaction, in which all the various material and immaterial components of social reality are constructed, depends on the possibility of “freezing” these processes for later, repeated inspection.⁸

Possibility became fact less than a hundred years ago.⁹ However, systematic social science use of the developments, which permitted auditory and then also visual recording of such processes, began much later. The analysis of the products of social interaction, from food, clothing and tools, factories, churches, jails, and cemeteries to legal codes, birth registries, music scores, and literature, certainly continues to be essential for an understanding of social reality. After all, they are what human communication and interaction is *intended* to produce. However, in the past decades, taking the new technologies for granted, we have been in an increasingly better position to direct our efforts to an analysis of the “production process” in relation to the “product” and in relation to the “consumption” of the “product,” that is, to an analysis of interaction and dialogue both as a part of social reality and as a source of much of social reality. And, technological innovation continued to add to the arsenal of instruments by which the widest imaginable variety of social interactions could be recorded, providing the data for sequential analysis.

This is the enterprise in which many of us were and are involved. The pioneer, Harvey Sacks, inspired a notable group of followers and successors.

⁸ Cf. Bergmann (1985).

⁹ Just about a century ago, one of the first uses, if not the first, of a phonograph was made for recordings of Montenegrin heroic epics, as a source of comparison for Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (cf. Parry 1930; Lord 1960).

Later, communicative genre theory used sequential analysis. As the data and most of the publications of the latter enterprise, in which I was active for many years, are in German, and translation of primary data of this nature is almost impossible, the results of our investigations did not reach monolingual investigators elsewhere. The international dialogue study group at the Reimers Foundation in Bad Homburg and those involved in the now regrettably defunct center of communication studies at the University of Linköping fared somewhat better. However, the study of the widest range of social phenomena using sequential analysis continues to be undertaken, as I noted, in the homeland of that method, the United States of America, and also in

its second home, Great Britain, for example, in pioneering work of political rhetoric and the equally well-known studies of work.

Let me conclude: Sequential analysis is not the only so-called qualitative method – how ill-conceived that term is! – and, qualitative methods are not the sole salvation of sociology. Yet, I am convinced that sequential analysis provides the empirical foundation for an essential component of contemporary social theory, in particular for one of its branches, the sociology of knowledge. It enables us to trace step-by-step the processes by which social reality is constructed and reconstructed. And that is not a minor matter.

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