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THE INTERACTIVE DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION: THE PRAGMATICS OF THE PALO ALTO GROUP

Abstract: Our paper proposes to analyze from a semiotic perspective the process of communication, as conceived within the Palo Alto Group. We will firstly show that, as a result of the Group's critiques and revisions of the linear or mechanistic theories of communication, new perspectives are brought about for the essential axes of transformation within communication: we do not communicate as from a distinct atom to another, through an isolated channel, but through parts which are equal to the whole, the whole itself being equal to the parts. This approach has been characterized as "organicist", studying and understanding communication as a dynamic process where the *relationship* between the elements is of prime importance. Reciprocal inclusion replaces the discursive aspects of communication and expression replaces representation. The reference point is thus situated beyond the mechanical parts of a whole ready to be dis- and reassembled. We conclude that through this perspective on communication, the notion of interaction between partners and between codes becomes a capital one and that, in this point, semiotics intersects with disciplines such as conversational analysis and the ethnography of communication.

Key words: communication, interaction, School of Palo Alto, content and relationship, meaning, signification, representation and expression

Introduction

In their whole, mechanistic theories have conceived communication as a compound which they explained through the strict delimitation of the elements comprised within. However, the 1950s and 1960s brought a paradigmatic change in the field of communication, along with the emergence of the organicist theories. The latter did not regard communication as a sum of various elements, but as a dynamic ensemble which favored both the interactive relationship between the elements (e.g., between transmitter, receiver, message, code, and so forth), as well as the relationships within a global context: "By using the preposition 'within', man is integrated in another model, the model of the *organism*, which is based upon an internal relationship between the parts and the whole. The metaphor of the organism governs the development of a universal ecology, whose traces we are to find in numerous subsequent theories of communication."[1]

This interactionist theory of communication is also backed up by the members of the "Invisible College"[2] or the so-called School of Palo Alto, named after the name of the charter city from the San Francisco Bay Area. The School comprises a group of researchers from various domains – anthropology, linguistics, mathematics, sociology and psychiatry – who oppose Shannon's mathematical theory of communication, which almost managed to impose itself as a dominant reference in the field. In 1942, at Bateson's call, Birdwhistell, Hall, Goffman, Watzlawick, and others form the initial Palo Alto Group. According to Winkin, the School of Palo Alto is not a school *per se* (as in organized and centered on a single academic discipline), its members having accidentally met within a conference, despite the fact that each knew of the work of the others.[3] The School is rather a generic name for a group of researchers reunited by means of certain common interests. These interests mainly concern the constant preoccupation for interpersonal communication[4], in a vision which drew away from communication as the transmission of information (based upon Shannon and Weaver's mathematical theory of information).

Expression *vs.* representation

Abandoning the linear model of communication, the researchers from Palo Alto adopt the retroactive circular model put forth by N. Wiener and von Foester's cybernetics. They stress that the mathematical theory conceived by telecommunication engineers *for themselves* should only be used in this kind of field, and that communication should be approached by human sciences according to their own model. In this respect, Winkin summarizes the differences between the two positions by stating that, from the Group's point of view, the complexity of the most insignificant situation of interaction is so large that its reduction to one or more

"variables" which should function linearly is futile. Research in communication should, thus, be conceived in terms of levels of complexity, of multiple contexts and of circular systems. In this circular vision of communication, the receiver plays a role that is just as important as that of the transmitter. The result is a new formulation of our relationship to the world, which is designated through communication, hence the necessity of reevaluating the terms, definitions and concepts that supported the analysis of this idea.

Therefore, expression replaces representation because communication does not any more take place between separate atoms by means of an isolated channel, but through parts that are equal to the whole. Inclusion is reciprocal, and the effect, which, in its turn, affects the cause, is in no way inferior to it. Within the movement, there is no degradation or loss, as it is the case in the models of communication based upon the billiard-ball or the machine metaphors. This model of communication is built spirally, according to the metaphor of the organism and proves to be a logical model with a specific problem: we do not anymore use instruments in order to communicate, "but we communicate with the common body of people and nature, in the two dimensions: of presence (the synchronic dimension) and of becoming (the diachronic dimension). The preposition which prevails here is *within*."[5]

Consequently, everything is communication: the science, the arts, or the daily activities are nothing but domains of communication, and communication is able to reflect the play of knowledge and of all other sorts of activities. Sfez argues that communication is both a form and a frame for activities, no matter if the subject is human, animal or natural: "As communication becomes a major process encompassing every activity, every language or every behavior, every scientific domain is subordinated to it. Wording, pertinent definitions, explanatory causal chains, verification and even reality, deduction and induction, they all become only a small tip of the iceberg that supports their effects: the non-verbal, the contradictory, the particular, and the nongeneralizable come into play."[6]

Taking into account the differences between the two perspectives (the metaphor of the machine and the metaphor of the organism), we could state that they independently set forth two different conceptions of communication. Representation, which marks the metaphor of the machine, is a useful way of interconnecting stochastic elements and of obtaining the strong liaisons required by life in the society: hierarchies, vertical and horizontal liaisons, representations of representations through signs and signals. This perspective pleads for exteriority and space. Communication is schematic and may be indicated, read, and expressed sequentially; it is discursive.

On the other hand, the expression corresponds to the metaphor of the organism and designates both an internal association, as well as total participation. If certain stages and hierarchies are necessary to link the elements which, by definition, are already certain totalities, this is only in order to resort to associations specific to particular domains. As a consequence, this second perspective is oriented towards the exterior, it is complex and paradoxical, it cannot be determined in time and space. According to Marc and Picard, the School of Palo Alto contributed the most to creating a new perspective on communication.[7] Within the School, there were basically two groups of researchers: Gregory Bateson and Don Jackson at first and, later, the group of researchers reunited by Paul Watzlawick. The two groups or – better said – stages, are basically two consecutive moments in the development of research on this matter.

Communicative and meaningful behavior

The most important contribution of the School of Palo Alto to the study of communication remains, without a doubt, the axiomatic model of communication. Borrowing concepts and models from the systemic approach, but also from linguistics and logics, the researchers from Palo Alto try to explain a global situation of interaction and not only to study some isolated variables. In their account, the object of study for pragmatics is represented by the effects of communication on behavior – two terms that are looked upon as synonyms. As such, communication pertains to a very vast definition, in which the relationships – both verbal and non-verbal – between a transmitter and a receiver are also included. This is what sets it apart from the canonical scheme of communication, as associations which are established through the exchange of messages between interlocutors are the ones that are being privileged. According to the Group, all the other elements of the scheme are only secondary: what is important here are not only the effects of a segment of the communication upon the receiver (i.e., generally speaking, the object of pragmatics), but also the effect that the receiver's reaction has upon the transmitter. In consequence, more stress is put on the relationship that binds the transmitter and the receiver (as being mediated by communication) than on the relationships between a transmitter (or a receiver) and the sign.[8]

From this point of view, communication is seen as a process of interaction, a notion that may be considered to be a system which relates to the general theory of systems, founded by Bertalanffy.[9] Bougnoux argues that no organism can evolve in the long term if it is isolated from the other and that, indeed, "to be" means "to relate". Considering that the messages we exchange are not often reducible to a single language, because they serve multiple purposes – besides the one of reciprocal informing – "a first distinction between content and relationship will show that what we call

communication is not just an exchange of information, but the latter is only the final stage in the process of communication."[10]

The problem concerning the connection between content and relationship is approached from the beginning of the work *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, which is in fact the programmatic study of the School of Palo Alto. To the hypothesis according to which every process of communication has two aspects, i.e., the content and the relationship, Watzlawick adds another, according to which the relationship comprises the content, thus becoming meta-communication. This shows in what category or at what level should a message be ranked, be it verbal, visual or behavioral. Therefore, deciphering a message or understanding a behavior implies knowing the frame in which it is placed; in other words, the semantics of the relationship or of the frame precedes the content of our representations and it manages them.

Communicating always implies two types of messages: frame messages and content messages. The sentences we utter contain words or are accompanied by suprasegmental signals which refer to posture, mimic, intonation, and which indicate the way in which others are to understand or interpret the respective sentences. This is what we call the "meta" part of language – the frame or the manner in which it is used – and its reception is indispensable for good communication.[11] This is why Winkin states that "communication is, for these authors, a social process which allows the integration of multiple behavior modes: the word, gesture, look, mimic, interpersonal space, etc. This is not about opposing *verbal communication* to *non-verbal communication*: communication is an integrated whole."[12]

We should state that, in a linguistic context, where only the verbal messages are taken into account, the terms "metalanguage" and "metalinguistic function"[13] are used to designate all the words and phrases which, starting from a sentence, lead towards and manage communication. According to Klinkenberg[14], if we do not wish to privilege verbal language, we can resort to the function he calls "meta-semiotic". Centered on the code, the function is present when a language speaks about another language, or – alternatively – when signs serve to designate other signs. What communication refers to, in this case, is thus an aspect of the code. If bits of the message carrying a phatic function may accompany the communicational exchange all the way through, the meta-semiotic function may also be constantly present: in the exchange, the hypothesis according to which the partners abide to the same code is, indeed, tested. If the hypothesis is not verified, meta-semiotic specifications for one of the interlocutors may interfere so as to modify the code.

Regarded from a philosophical perspective, meta-communication is highly important, as the ability to meta-communicate in a satisfactory

manner is not only the *sine qua non* condition of good communication, but it is also tightly connected to the vast problem of (self-)consciousness. The School's theory of communication retrieves the originary meaning of the term "communication" (lat. *communicare*, which means having in common, being in a relationship) and represents an opposition from within the human sciences to the mathematical-cybernetic model. Additionally, the "orchestral" model of communication tends to highlight the necessity of a grammar of communication without which it cannot carry out its essential functions.

As Winkin points out, the analogy with the metaphor of the orchestra "serves to explain why one can state that each individual takes part in communication, rather that stating that he or she is its origin or its result. The image of an invisible score reminds us of the fundamental postulate of a grammar of the behavior, which everyone uses in the most various exchanges with others."[15] This is the meaning of an orchestral model of communication, as opposed to the telegraphic one. Entering an orchestra means "playing" a certain code, inscribing oneself in a relationship compatible with the available means of communication, channels and networks.

In addition, the metaphor of the orchestra offers the advantage of juxtaposing the linear image of the telegraph, through which Shannon summarized the transmission of information (transmitter – code – channel – message – receiver) and Bateson's model, which is much more sensitive towards systemic or loop causalities, as well as towards the priority of the relationship over the content. Consequently, communication is considered to be an integrated social phenomenon, and through its grammar and logic it builds connection points between relational and organizational aspects, between the mechanisms that control interpersonal relationships and those that control social orders.

The focus is now not on the communicational behavior, but on the constitutive rules of various situations of communication. Through the basic postulate of the Palo Alto Group, communication is, in consequence, subject to certain rules whose existence is pointed out by redundancy, which is itself recurrent for certain elements from within a process of interaction.

As we have seen earlier in this paper, messages are polyphonic, being sent through multiple channels or simultaneously using multiple codes, which protects them from noise, entropy or loss of information on the way. Channels and codes define the address of our messages or the desired level of reception: seriousness, jokes, linguistic examples, etc. Normally, these analogical messages or, as Watzlawick puts it, these "less coded" messages are redundant in connection to the verbal message, in the sense that the corporeal or visual relation of our gestures prepares,

supports and transports the verbal content of the message. This is why, according to Watzlawick, an out-of-the-context or what seems to be an aleatory behavior attracts our attention and surprises us, determining us to recognize its "impropriety" – this may be even more obvious than language errors.

Paradox and *schizophrenic communication*

But what converges in the case of a successful transmission may become, at any given time, a series of divergent elements, for if the rules are abided to within the frame of normal communication, when it comes to pathological communication, they are rather transgressed. Such is the case of what Watzlawick calls "schizophrenic communication", where the verbal content of the message is refuted right from the moment of enunciation by the frame message, which should have actually confirmed the first. Referring to this kind of situations, Watzlawick also uses the phrase "pragmatic paradox". A first attempt to define the paradox implies the idea of contradiction at which one arrives after a correct deduction based upon consistent premises, and thus excluding sophisms from the beginning. There are three types of paradoxes that have preoccupied the Palo Alto School: the logical-mathematical paradoxes[16], the paradoxical definitions or semantic antinomies[17], and the pragmatic paradoxes or paradoxical injunctions[18], each of these corresponding to the logical, semantic and pragmatic level of communication. The researchers from Palo Alto will use the term "paradox" with reference to the situation in which the content of communication refutes or is being refuted by the signals of the orchestra, which are normally convergent and peripheral.

Going back to the rules according to which communication is built, we should note that these are the ones that provide the basis for "computing" the communication, whose authors, by analogy with the game theory, postulate its existence. Their main objective is to build a model that will highlight these rules and this computation, solely by observing the redundancies and without resorting to explicit justifications from the subjects of the interaction. The prototype of this maneuver is the possibility to reconstitute the rules of chess simply by observing the game and not asking the players about the reasons behind their moves. From this perspective, the psychic is considered to be a black box[19] in which the inter-psychic processes – which are, after all, hypotheses that cannot be verified – are less important that the function of this box within the vast system of human interaction.

The problem of meaning is thus left aside, because it cannot be verified objectively in the chosen frame. What is more, the study is limited to the research of a synchronic model, as the Palo Alto Group refuses references to the past as explanatory factors (hence the opposition to

psychoanalysis): "This approach is, therefore, the research of a *hic et nunc* model, in a greater measure than the research of a symbolic universe, of motivations or causes from the past."[20] As such, actual relationships are much more important than any subjective reference to the past; this is why the explanatory model is focused more on researching the effects rather that their causes: when the cause of a behavioral segment remains obscure, we can carry out our study by focusing on the segment's purposefulness.

To these aspects, we are to add two other characteristics. As the processes of communication are systems with a retroactive effect, attributing them a beginning and an ending is quite difficult. Circularity is, thus, a fundamental propriety of the process of communication, as analyzed by the Palo Alto Group, because each actor is in its turn a transmitter and a receiver, and each behavior is in the same time a reaction towards the previous and an inductor for the next. Consequently, every causal explanation, be it linear or mechanistic, should be rejected. Each segment of communication asks for an interpretation within its context, and normality and abnormality thus become relative terms of the interaction process.

The axiomatic model of communication and the problem of signification

For the members of the Palo Alto Group, Winkin argues, research regarding communication only begins when the following question is posed: "out of the thousands of possible corporeal behaviors, which are those retained by culture in order to build meaningful assembles?"[21]Although the question is somewhat baffling, "we are actually talking about a generalization of the fundamental problem of the linguist, who, in front of thousands of sounds which may be produced by the vocal tract, tries to identify the few tens of sounds used by a culture in order to constitute a certain language. By posing this problem of selection and organization of behaviors, a new postulate is brought about: the existence of behavioral *codes*."[22] The task of these codes is to select and organize personal and interpersonal behavior, as well as to integrate it in a context and, thus, in its signification. Accordingly, everyone – although unconsciously – necessarily lives in and through codes, because all behavior consists of making use of them.

Hence the first axiom of communication elaborated by the researchers from Palo Alto: "One cannot not communicate."[23] Its meaning is easier to understand if we consider the equivalence between communication and behavior. The reasoning is based on the idea that behavior has no opposite, meaning that we cannot not own a behavior. If we agree that, within each interaction, every behavior has a message value, i.e., it represents some sort of communication, then, indeed, we cannot not communicate. Activity or inactivity, words or silence, everything has a

message value. These behaviors influence others, and others, in reply, cannot not react to them.

The second axiom differentiates between the two levels of communication, stating that "Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore meta-communication."[24] The content of communication is the message (the information transmitted), while the relationship is defined through the commitment and behavior of the partners. The relationship indicates the way in which the message asks to be understood.

The third axiom of communication ascertains that each person involved in an interaction process organizes both the sequence of events and their structure subjectively, so that each interlocutor defines his or her own behavior as a reaction to the other's.

The fourth axiom is: "Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically."[25] According to Watzlawick and to his collaborators, the digital aspect of communication represents messages through words using discrete units which can be completely arbitrary in what they mean. Analogical communication, on the other hand, uses a continuous matter. The analogical aspect brings about messages by means of non-verbal language; messages are pointed out through posture, gestures, facial expression, voice inflexion, and so forth; the analogical is thus meaningful by resemblance with the signified and, unlike the digital aspect, it knows no logical function of negation, disjunction, and implication. The analogical can only use conjunctions: if we recall that every communication has two aspects (content and relationship), we can expect to see the two completing each other within the same message. In all likelihood, the content will be transmitted digitally, while the relationship will essentially be analogical.

According to the fifth and last axiom, "All communicational interchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on sameness or difference." [26] Symmetrical interaction is based upon the equality between the partners, while complementary interaction regards their differences. We should add that the two types can alternate within the same interaction.

In what regards the five axioms of communication, Watzlawick and his collaborators note at the end of their programmatic study that they should be regarded as initial attempts to offer a logical and systematic form to an extremely complex process and, as such, they are best treated as preliminary studies to a more adequate theory. Likewise, the heterogeneousness of the axioms is owed to the fact that they are based upon certain conclusions that have resulted from observing communicational phenomena from numerous unique registers. As a consequence, their unity (if there is one) resides not in their originality, but in their pragmatic relevance. This emphasizes the interpersonal

connotations and not the separate elements of the communicational act, which also accounts for the systemic perspective of the approach.

Weak and strong points: the problem of meaning

In what concerns the field of communication, the School of Palo Alto occupies a special place, one which enforces the belief that the discoveries of the researchers within the "Invisible College" represent much more than the intuition that any behavior (including the lack of a manifest one) represents a form of communication. This explains why "their work has received special attention in the last few years, as well as a diffusion large enough to facilitate the approach to analogical processes (marked by relationship) from a semiotic point of view (signs of discursive relationship between the subjects of the process of communication)."[27]

Although the research of the Palo Alto Group was mainly concerned with "the dynamics of the family and of the child", as a result of Bateson's influence, who was interested in human systems in general, we are now dealing with an enlarged vision on communication. The principles that found this perspective are the following: (1) communication is a social phenomenon, a set of views and rules that make interaction and relationships possible between members of a certain culture, the individual being regarded as a "social actor"; (2) intentionality does not determine communication, which means that interaction in interpersonal communication only represents a moment within a culture, understood as an informational flux; (3) on the other hand, we do not always succeed in communicating what we intend to communicate, or we end up communicating involuntarily what we wouldn't want to communicate.

As all types of behavior are potentially communicative (otherwise said, they are meaningful through form and content), Albert Scheflen, one of the prominent members of the School, proposes "a classification of types of behavior under the form of a matrix of communicative behaviors."[28] Although it is usual to talk about verbal and non-verbal behavior, Scheflen considers that the scheme he proposes is much more complex, including: verbal behavior, which can be linguistic (Watzlawick was especially interested in this) or paralinguistic (Trager's work on linguistics[29]); kinetic behavior, which includes corporeal movements, including "facial expressions" (Birdwhistell and Bateson), micro gestures (pupil dilation, red cheeks, etc.), posture (Scheflen); tactile behavior; territorial behavior or proxemics (Hall); other types of communicative behaviors, such as smells; finally, clothing, cosmetic, ornamental behavior, etc. [30] Boutaud draws attention on the fact that these variables are "at work" in situations of real interaction, thus describing "a sphere of interactional influence in which non-verbal activity plays a firsthand role."[31]

The synonymy established between communication and behavior may seem somewhat far-fetched, in the sense that communicational phenomena own certain characteristics that differentiate them from other types of behavior or change. Sign and symbol transmission must be regarded differently from commodity or energy exchanges, even if the latter may imply the first. Certain corporeal gestures may represent signals, while other may not. With other words, some gestures may simply mean an isolated outburst, even if they may be important for the mental state of those to whom they belong. Certainly, researchers from Palo Alto knew the difference between the two types of behavior, but the idea according to which communication and behavior are synonyms may still generate some confusions.

Taking into account the theoretical frame in which the Palo Alto Group conducts its activities, it is not surprising to find, beyond its direct influence, various works interested in the pragmatics of communication and especially in gestural semiotics, to which we may add the works in the field of mediology, publicity or those interested in the components of kinetic, territorial and postural communication – they all constantly invigorate the processes of signification.

Conceiving communication as an integrated whole is one of the Palo Alto Group's essential contributions. Consequently, the School will conclude that everything is communication, offering a new account of man's relationship to the world. Representation yields to expression. From a mere instrument of knowledge, communication is elevated to the rank of a general context totalizer. Nobody can, thus, shun communication. Every activity, be it scientific or mundane, is in this manner situated within a frame called "communication"; it furnishes the rules of understanding for all the things in the world, because science, art and daily practices are but sectors within the encompassing whole of communication. Communication reflects the whole game of narration and its activities, and its rules are thus universal.

Another important contribution of the School of Palo Alto regards the problem of intersubjectivity. The communicational model proposed is an anti-representational one, according to which communication is not just a means of expressing and explaining reality. Moreover, according to Watzlawick, there isn't only a single reality, but different versions of it[32], versions which may sometimes be contradictory, but in all cases they are the effects of communication and not the reflection of some objective and eternal truths. As a consequence, communication is not only transmission of information and of messages, as it is the case in the mathematical theory of information. It asks to be understood as a "reciprocal comprehension", or, better said, an "inter-comprehension" which facilitates the access to the other's subjectivity, to his or her intentions and motivations.

Since communication is circular and continuous, enabling a perpetual interaction between participants through various channels and means, the notions of "transmitter" and "receiver" are somewhat left aside. Also, the classical notion of "message" is surpassed, as the relationship prevails over the content of communication. Communication is, therefore, similar to an orchestra without a conductor, in which everybody interacts with everybody, or, as Winkin puts it, "the speaker takes part in the ritual of communication similar to the way in which the musician takes part in music interpretation."[33]

An important critique brought to this communicational model is that it seems to lack a solid semantic basis. If the Palo Alto Group seems to leave aside the problem of meaning in its methods, it will approach the matter when operating the distinction between the two levels of communication. What is more, the definition it offers for "relationship" (i.e., a manner in which we should understand the message) greatly resembles the donation of the object in Frege's logic.

As far as relationship is concerned, the researchers from Palo Alto state that "individuals do not communicate over the facts that are external to their relationship, but they offer each other reciprocal definitions of this relationship through involvement in what concerns them." [34] The consequence is that problems pertaining to signification and meaning cannot be avoided. However, the Palo Alto Group does not renounce them; at least this is to be understood from the analysis of E. Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, where they resort to the meaning contained in a message and destined for the participants at the act of communication.[35] This is how the problem of meaning, which the researchers from Palo Alto wished to place outside of their framework, accounts for the subjective motivations and justifications of the behavior. "But in an analysis of a *hic et nunc* interaction, their [the Group's] explanation refers to the way in which the message is understood, thus to a certain manner of meaning. This reference would have a lot to gain if it were based upon an explicit semantic theory."[36]

The inconsistency and the lack of reference systematization is another point that attracted numerous critiques, among which that of L. Sfez, who questions the epistemological basis of the School of Palo Alto. In Sfez's opinion, the set of theories and practices proposed by the members of the School is a "compact and repetitive one, with conceptual slips, using different references and arbitrarily denying or selecting other."[37] Is it not right to ask ourselves at this point whether the references are fragmented or truncated or if the cited authors are unselfconsciously approached? Indeed, the fundamental ideas of the School stem from Russell, Carnap and Wittgenstein's logic (but nobody states exactly what idea is whose), from cybernetics (Bateson was a great fan of Wiener), from "Milton

Erikson's analytic therapy, from systemism, from structuralism, and ecology. Somewhere far away lays a renegade Freud and some authors of the Antiquity […] Marxism? Absent. Husserl, phenomenology, dissident psychoanalysis schools, Lacan & Co: untraceable…"[38]

The rejection of "the old" (of the *vieux monde*), Sfez writes, is accompanied by another characteristic of the Group's pragmatism, which consists of a fortified recognition of the present, an optimistic philosophy of simultaneity which is detached from the nostalgia of the beginning. Although he pretends his position in neutral and only interested in seeing whether the Group's theory of generalized communication is apt in offering a proper symbolism to renew our conception of world and man, Sfez denounces – in all likelihood, out of considerations that pertain to nationality or individual preferences – the lack of lecturing Descartes, Bergson, or Hegel: "there is no other play between signifiers and signifieds. Everything that may look metaphysical is out of the question. There is no substance, there is no attribute. There are no questions on being or nothingness."[39] Under these circumstances, what is the epistemological basis for passing from a new science of the singular and particular, of the action placed in a context, to a general situation that may support the doctrine in the absence of results?

Moreover, the lack of a coherent basis prevents us from acknowledging what subject is at the core of the analyses carried out by the Palo Alto Group. We only know that, as a result of structuralism, cybernetics, and systems theory, the subjects are never individually considered (they are never isolated). They are always in a certain situation, in a context, connected and determined by the environment in which they live. However, this aggravates considerably the understanding of decision making, of the freedom of a subject. An identical difficulty appears in what concerns the place of the interpreter. Although, initially, the observer is supposed to be both external and internal (this would require some further analysis on the self-referential paradox and the creation of a metalanguage and a meta-theory that would allow for this paradox to be tackled), yet "as of now, nothing is mentioned about the changes undergone by the interpreter as a result of the therapies he or she conducts. This side of the matter is completely ignored: a blind spot."[40]

Despite these shortcomings, the Group's perspective should not, in Sfez's opinion, be neglected, as the inventions proposed, the work focused on present rather than past, the focus of the "how?" rather than on the "why?" represent a prominent involvement of the School in a new form of pragmatism, in a specific singular philosophy of efficacy and action.

Conclusion

The School of Palo Alto rejects the first linear and mechanistic models, in which the process of communication is totally transparent and based upon the passivity of both the receiver and the transmitter, as well as on the idea of emitting and transmitting univocal messages by means of a channel. Replacing this approach with the idea of communication as a circular process within a social and cultural milieu opens the path for evermore complex approaches of the process. Moreover, once the members of the Palo Alto Group have begun to focus on the research of non-verbal language, studies have also flourished regarding the phatic function and the metalanguage in communication.

Conceiving communication as an interactional process, "the new conception of communication" (Winkin) overcomes the strictly linguistic telegraphic model of coding and decoding messages. In other words, passing from the functional study of behavior to explaining its generative rules necessarily implies the problem of signification.

[1] Lucien Sfez, *Critique de la communication* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 44-45. All translation from French belongs to Cristian Hainic and Codruța Porcar.

[2] The name was introduced by Yves Winkin, *La nouvelle communication* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 21.

[3] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 21.

[4] Especially mental health issues related to communication, family therapy and schizophrenia. The new ideas emerged as a consequence of theoretical research, but also of research carried out within clinical institutions. The researchers from Palo Alto were especially interested in confronting their models and concepts with the analysis of real communication, firstly and even exclusively in the domain of psychiatry.

[5] Sfez, *Critique de la communication*, 235.

[6] Sfez, *Critique de la communication*, 236.

[7] Edmond Marc and Dominique Picard, *L'École de Palo Alto* (Paris: Retz, 2006).

[8] Watzlawick, Paul et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), 40.

[9] Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a biologist by profession, defines the general theory of systems as the constitution and derivation of the valid principles of "systems" in general. He developed a theory of open systems, that is, systems which exchange matter with the environment, as any other "living" system.

[10] Daniel Bougnoux, *Introduction aux sciences de la communication* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 18.

[11] Meta-communication means communicating about communication, and Watzlawick tries to explain this through an analogy with meta-mathematics: mathematics, in its theorems and demonstrations, makes use of specific signs and symbols that designate the language of mathematics. However, if mathematicians should talk over a specific problem, they will not use a

language characteristic of mathematics, but some sort of a *discourse* on mathematics. Similarly, in order to talk about communication, a discourse on communication is required, and meta-communication fulfills this need, except that the symbols characteristic of communication are not specific (as it is the case in mathematics); they belong to common language.

[12] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 24.

[13] One of the six functions of communication proposed by Roman Jakobson. See his "Linguistique et poétique" in *Essais de linguistique générale,* vol. 1 (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1963), 138-147.

[14] See Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, *Précis de sémiotique générale* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000).

[15] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 25-26.

[16] The famous paradox of the classes of all classes which are not themselves members of themselves, considered, among others, by B. Russell, through the theory of logical types, which proposes an essential principle: what comprises the elements of a class, must not and cannot be a member of the class (the axiom proposed by Russell: no class can be a member of itself). Consequently, the logical paradox stems from a juxtaposition of logical types and levels.

[17] This case was sketched by the most renowned paradox, that of Epimenides the Cretan, who declared that "all Cretans are liars". One can easily see that the relation of enunciation, directly denounced by the very sentence itself, offers the sentence an undecidable character: if he is lying, then he isn't lying; if he isn't lying, then he is lying, and so on.

[18] Which, besides the specific conclusions for the semantic paradox, also implies relations of complementarity, e.g., those between professors and students, in which in order to carry out a task, one needs to disregard that specific task. See Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 193.

[19] *Id est* a sort of sealed device which is inaccessible to direct observation.

[20] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 40.

[21] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 22- 23.

[22] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 23.

[23] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 51.

[24] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 54.

[25] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 66.

[26] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 70.

[27] Jean-Jacques Boutaud, *Sémiotique et communication: Du signe au sens* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 158.

[28] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 147.

[29] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 164 and 196.

[30] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 147.

[31] Boutaud, *Sémiotique et communication*, 160.

[32] See Paul Watzlawick and John H. Weakland, *La réalité de la réalité: confusion, désinformation, communication* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984).

[33] Winkin, *La nouvelle communication*, 103.

[34] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 83.

[35] Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 162 and 171.

[36] Christian Baylon and Xavier Mignot, *La communication. Les outils et les formes de la communication: une présentation méthodique et illustrée* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 66.

[37] Sfez, *Critique de la communication*, 258.

[38] Sfez, *Critique de la communication*, 260.

[39] Sfez, *Critique de la communication*, 261.

[40] Sfez, *Critique de la communication*, 266.

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