

A Glimpse into the Realm of Symbolic Communication

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the importance of symbolic communication and to synthesize the headway made so far in the understanding of this fundamental component of our conscious and unconscious mind. The extant definitions and descriptions of this process were briefly examined and its impact on human subjects was evaluated. The conclusions show the existence and manifestation of 2 types of symbolic communication and focus on the role played by the one employing motivated symbols in preserving and transmitting fundamental social values and in building a bridge between the real and the imaginary worlds, the present and the absent, the known and the unknown, the concrete and the abstract, and between men and universe.

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1. Introduction

The production, transmission, reception, storage, retrieval and use of information by the members of the social groups describe the major components of the communication process and play a fundamental part in the functioning and the evolution of human civilization.

Symbolism, as a mode of signification and communication, is a deeply rooted participant in the inner and public lives of the past and current cultural paradigms. Communication and symbolism are studied by specialists belonging to various domains such as semiotics, sociology, political science, psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, anthropology and neurology.

The attraction for the study of communication increased after the Second World War, due to a rising awareness regarding the economic, political and social implications triggered by communication issues and due to the development of new technologies that augmented the volume of information transmitted as well as the access to the flux of information. An indication of this evolution was the creation of university departments dedicated to the analysis of communication, the introduction of the domain as a subject in the curriculum, and the inclusion of communication skills among the requirements to be met by employees. The analysis of symbolism became an object of formal study during the Middle Ages and remained a constant preoccupation for scholars ever since.

2. Definition of communication

The common understanding of communication is usually reduced to a simplified presentation of the process as the transmission of a message about a certain subject by a sender to a particular receiver.

Yet this common sense perception of communication is not confirmed the multiple attempts to define it. The study of these versions allowed Dance to identify 15 distinct points of view which highlight different aspects or components of communication and signal the underlying complexity of this human behavior: 1. Language or code, 2. Reception, 3. Relationships between the participants, 4. Reduction of uncertainty in view of adoption, 5. Transmission, 6. Connotation, 7. Communication as connection, 8. Common ground, 9. Channel, 10. Storage of information, 11. Selection and interpretation of information, 12. Stimulus-response situation, 13. Intention and purpose, 14. Context, 15. Power to exert influence (Dance and Dance, 1970).

A working definition could describe communication as a permanent, circular, open/close process, involving participants who exchange information in determined contexts (space, time, situation), using a format and a channel for information transfer, developing relations (characterized by attraction/rejection, cooperation/conflict, subordination/superordination, equality/inequality), using a common code as well as a set of formal/informal rules regarding the unfolding of the communication activity, following particular purposes, adapting their input by means of feedback, and obtaining certain effects.

3. Means of communications

The modalities employed by communications are determined by the level of development of the society and by the social and cultural rules accepted at given moments by the members of the community.

The means of communications used by individuals influence the selection of participants in the communications process, the frequency of the exchanges, the quality of the communicational events, and the content of the occurrences. The means of communications include the messages, the procedures to encode the messages, the various ways in which messages can be transmitted, and the decoding and interpretation procedures used by the receivers. The messages are classified according to the type of signs used to generate them, and which are listed forthwith: the generic categories of indexes, icons, and symbols the important categories of linguistic signs (as illustrated by spoken and written languages), and non-verbal language signs (body language).

4. Definition of the symbol

Peirce (1958), one of the “founding fathers” of semiotics, defines indexes, icons, and symbols in relation to the way in which these semiotic devices associate the signifier and the signified: in indexes the connection relies on contiguity, in icons on resemblance, and in symbols on convention. Thus, cause-and-effect relationship such as those holding between rain and wet streets illustrate an indexed configuration, tracks in the sand are

iconically representative of the feet that made them, and the English word rain indicates a meteorological phenomenon by virtue of a convention accepted by speakers of English. The dictionary definitions highlight the dual nature of the symbol by showing its capacity to function both as an arbitrary sign (the Peircean point of view) and as a motivated one thus, the symbol is a “mark or character taken as the conventional sign of some object or idea or process, e.d. the astronomical signs for the planets”, or a “thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something (especially an idea or quality) by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought”, e.g. “white” for “purity” (Sykes, 1976).

Evseev (1983) explains the symbol as a type of motivated sign, comprising two components, the signifier/symbolizer and the signified/symbolized. While the former belongs to the world of our perceptions, the latter is a concept, a mental entity related to a referent which can be real or imaginary. The relation between the two components (the symbolize and the symbolized) is essentially cultural and it is based on analogy or contiguity. The symbolic connotations do not eliminate the primary, referential meaning.

The discussion regarding the nature of the link uniting the “visible” and the “invisible” sides of the symbol has evolved into the establishment of antagonistic groups upholding irreconcilable opinions concerning the issue under analysis.

The supporters of the traditional point of view consider symbols as images taken from the sensible world that speak of realities of another order which cannot be described, or evoked otherwise that by analogy. The application of this principle lead to the development of the law of correspondences whose functioning is described by Rene Guenon, quoted by Raine (1965): “By virtue of this law, each thing, proceeding as it does from a metaphysical principle from which it derives all its reality, translates or expresses that principle in its own fashion and in accordance with its own order of existence, so that from one order to another all things are linked together and correspond in such a way as to contribute to the universal from one order to another all things are linked together and correspond in such a way as to contribute to the universal and total harmony, which, in the multiplicity of manifestation, can be likened to a reflection of the principal unity itself. For this reason, the laws of a lower domain can always to be taken to symbolize realities of a higher order, wherein resides their profoundest cause, which is at once their principle and their end”.

The theory of the transcendental, motivated link, uniting the symbolizer to the symbolized, is rejected by the positivists, who rely on the supremacy of the language of fact and science, and grant the symbol only a secular, semiotic “power”, classifying it either as an arbitrary sign, used in chemistry, physics, or mathematics, or a type of partially motivated sign which possesses “the rudiments of a natural link between signifier and signified” (Saussure, 1969).

But even this frail connection is rejected by those semioticians who refuse to abandon the principle of arbitrariness of signs for the sake of this exception, although the structuralists and the phenomenologists regard the symbolic relation between the signifier and the signified as “natural” (Culianu, 2002).

Culianu (2002) shares the views of the former group and justifies his position by showing that the signifier-signified relation in symbols is basically intellectual, artificial and cultural in its nature. In his opinion, the mind, in which the discussed relation is originated, could react in different ways to “different typologies, climatic conditions, and

cosmogonies. “Symbols are cultural because they accompany certain technological paradigms and they are modified as new paradigms arise. For example, the symbolic universe of hunter-gatherer was radically transformed by the advent of agriculture and the creation of sedentary settlement”.

According to Culianu (2002), the creation of symbols is the result of the interaction between the human mind and the world as well as of the interaction between the mind and its own subjective imagine. Also, considering the symbols from a chronicle point of view, he expresses the opinion that the latter group appears to be more persistent than the one generated in the man-world relationship.

5. The communicational dimension of the symbol

Evseev describes the human simbolarium as a symbolic code possessing a “vocabulary” and a ‘grammar”, its components being defined by paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, based on similarities and differences, as well as on associations determined by different types of occurrence, i.e., simultaneity or succession (Culianu 2002). The paradigmatic relations mentioned above include association based on partial synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy; on this dimension the meanings intersect and the symbols are ordered in derivational series: for example, the solar symbolism assembles in a single paradigm different symbols whose individual meanings allow only the establishment of a relation of partial synonymy.

The syntagmatic dimension becomes manifest in symbolic texts generated according to either mythic or poetic principles; in these texts, the succession of symbols is subordinated to certain text generation rules which are isomorphic with the rules applied in the creation of any type of message. People develop a lifelong familiarity with symbols as a result of their exposure to the public and private, formal and informal teaching referring to symbols and their meaning. The communication based on symbols seems to come naturally to humans and the oneiric experiences can easily illustrate this observation. This natural mental activity during which symbols are produced, recorded, and interpreted relies on the specialization of and the cooperation between the two hemispheres of the brain: ”The left hemisphere processes information sequentially, the right hemisphere simultaneously, accessing several inputs at once” (Sagan, 1977). The right hemisphere is also the seat of non-verbal pattern recognition and auditory pattern recognition of a “holistic and simultaneous nature, very different from the analytical and verbal processes which are located exclusively in the left hemisphere” (Lawlor 1978). Individuals find symbols attractive because they satisfy “the human need to visualize the abstract and the need to transcend the visible” (Liiceanu, 1978). Another reason for humans to accept symbols consists in their modality of communicating information: the symbols offer a subtle, non-intrusive way of getting the meaning across, a possibility to avoid obvious, direct, readymade “message” which readers tend to resent; also, because the meaning is not “given” one has to work his way along various interpretation scenarios in order to reach a satisfactory “vantage point”, thus enjoying both a sense of knowing and feeling of living participation.

The impact of the symbol on the human subject is not solely determined by the fact

that the symbol is talking to his intellect, forcing him to accept, simultaneously, a cluster of meanings, but also by its capacity to address to intuition and the senses of the individual, thus creating both a mental, an emotional and a “sensory” experience. This combined effect is possible due to the fact that the human brain is able to generate both nonverbal and verbal thought, the former category including the use of various types of images which one can bring to mind without the assistance of “propositional” reasoning (Crystal, 1991).

6. Conclusion

The symbolic communication includes two types of signs, the former relying on an arbitrary connection between symbolize and symbolized and the latter building its associations on analogy or contiguity. While the arbitrary signs are apt to produce linear, sequential messages, allowing us to understand and organize the world where we live, the motivated symbols are able to generate meanings which are not accessible by other means, to act as interpreters of reality, and to function as a bridge between the real and the imaginary worlds, the present and the absent, the known and the unknown, the concrete and the abstract and between men and universe. The motivated symbols express a marked axiological content, of an ethical or aesthetic nature and they are always communicating attitudes and values. In doing so, they also fulfil a social function, preserving and transmitting the fundamental knowledge of the community and enforcing its commandments.

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