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The semiotic paradox of the improbability of communication

O paradoxo semiótico da improbabilidade da comunicação

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ABSTRACT

The paper interprets Niklas Luhmann's theorem of the "improbability of communication" as an argument against the ideal of a perfect congruence between communicating minds, whose more moderate precursors are: (1) Thomas Hobbes theory of deceitful communication, (2) implications of exclusion in the etymology of the word communication, (3) J. Lotman's code theoretical objections against the idea of communication on the basis of a common code, (4) cognitive theories concerning impediments in communication based on the assumption that minds are black boxes, (5) Charles S. Peirce's communication theory, and (6) poststructuralist and deconstructivist views concerning the impossibility of congruence in communication (Foucault, Derrida).

Keywords: communication (impossibility of), congruence in communication, Niklas Luhmann, code theory, poststructuralism, Charles S. Peirce.

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RESUMO

O artigo interpreta o teorema da "improbabilidade da comunicação" de Niklas Luhmann como um argumento contra o ideal de uma congruência perfeita entre as mentes comunicantes, cujos precursores mais moderados são: (1) a teoria de Thomas Hobbes da comunicação enganosa, (2) as implicações da exclusão na etimologia da palavra comunicação, (3) as objeções da teoria do código de J. Lotman contra a ideia de comunicação com base em um código comum, (4) teorias cognitivas sobre os impedimentos à comunicação baseadas na suposição de que as mentes são caixas-pretas, (5) a teoria da comunicação de C. S. Peirce e (6) as visões pós-estruturalistas e desconstrutivistas sobre a impossibilidade de congruência na comunicação (Foucault, Derrida).

Palavras-chave: comunicação (impossibilidade de), congruência comunicativa, Niklas Luhmann, teoria do código, pós-estruturalismo, Charles S. Peirce

THE QUESTION WHETHER communication is a reality of social life or a mere fiction is not an issue with which classical communication theory since Shannon and Weaver (1949) had been concerned. Communication was its object of study, and theorists in communication studies had no doubt about the fundamental ubiquity of communication in human life. Those who did not communicate, the autistics, for example, were a case for psychiatric studies of communication, such as that of Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1973). Communication philosopher Augusto Ponzio even postulates that "communicating is being" (Ponzio 1999: 7), and together with Susan Petrilli, he answers the question, "Can we *be* without communicating", in the negative: "Communication is being. To communicate is to persist in one's own being. It is self-preservation. […] Communication coincides with being" (Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 522). From a biosemiotics perspective, the authors even extend this ontological premise to animal life in general: "An organism is communication […], a communicating being, in itself, on its own account, as an organism. An organism is a device for self-communication or self-preservation, and therefore capable of persisting in its own being" (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005, p. 522).

Despite such seemingly obvious ubiquity of communication, social systems theorist Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998), in a 1981 article widely cited and translated in 1992 under the title "The Improbability of Communication", has questioned whether communication actually happens, aiming with this argument to "lay aside the routine expectations and certainties of everyday life" (19192, p. 122) about how communication processes happen. The author took up the same theme in §7 of chapter 4, "Communication and Action", of his book *Social Systems* (1995, pp. 157-163). Luhmann's paradox of communicating the improbability of communication and several variants of such doubts are the subject of this paper, but Luhmann's theorem is only the point of departure of this study since it also deals with related communication theoretical premises proposed before Luhmann and again in the wake of post-structuralism.

Paradoxically, the paper in which Luhmann first expressed his fundamental doubts concerning the likelihood of communication begins with a premise quite similar to Ponzio's: "Without communication there can be no human relations, indeed no human life" (1981, p. 122).

In its radicalness, Luhmann's thesis of the improbability of communication has found not much support among researchers in communication studies. It is even likely that Luhmann himself formulated his radical theorem primarily for the rhetorical purpose of arguing for the more moderate thesis that the ideal of perfect communication is rarely achieved, for had he taken his premise

seriously, he would have recognized that it leads to the conclusion that his own ideas could not be communicated to anyone.

However, if Luhmann's theorem of the improbability of communication is interpreted in the less radical sense that there are fundamental obstacles to perfectly successful communication, a greater number of communication theorists would embrace it. It is also worth remembering that the aporia of the impossibility of communicating the incommunicable has been a rhetorical figure known since Homer. Ernst Robert Curtius defined it as the *Unsagbarkeitstopos*, the aporia of wanting to express the inexpressible or speaking the unspeakable (1948).

LUHMANNLS THREE DOUBTS ABOUT THE PROBABILITY OF COMMUNICATION

The premises of the Luhmannian theorem can be found in his systems theoretical approach to communication (Schneider, 1994, pp. 149-190). The mutual exchange of ideas is not likely, according to this theory, because minds are closed self-referential systems, and this makes the mutual access between two or more minds impossible. In more detail, Luhmann distinguishes three mutually reinforcing obstacles that make communication unlikely:

1. The addressee of a message is unlikely to understand what the addresser means because the minds involved in the communicative process are structured differently and therefore they interpret the same message in different ways. Luhmann argues, "The first improbability is, that given the separateness and individuality of human consciousness, one person can understand what another means. Meaning can be understood only in context, and context for each individual consists primarily of what his own memory supplies" (1981, p. 123).
2. The more time passes and distance between the addresser and the addressee increases, the more it becomes unlikely that addressees will accept or even be interested in the message addressed to them. As the distance between one and the other increases, the likelihood that the receiver will understand what the sender meant decreases: "The problem is one of extension in space and time. The system of interaction […] collapses if a desire not to communicate is perceptibly communicated. Beyond the limits of this interactional system […], the rules obtaining in that context can no longer be imposed. Hence, even if the communication finds means of conveyance that are mobile and constant over time, it is improbable that it will command attention. In other situations, people have other things to do" (1992, pp. 123-124).

3. The third and last improbability is the "improbability of success" (1992, p. 124). It is unlikely that addressers can make their addressees accept and assimilate their own ideas. However, that this should be so is not so surprising since Luhmann's target for success in communication is most ambitious: "By success I mean that the recipients of the communication accepts the selective content of the communication (the information) as a premise of their own behavior" (1992, p. 124). An addressee who accepts a message according this definition would be one who acts "in accordance with corresponding directives" or processes "experiences, thoughts and other perceptions on the assumption that a certain piece of information is correct" (ibid.). The scenario of communication in this sense is one that allows only total agreement; it leaves no space for disagreement or even dispute.

In view of this conception of communication as ideal mutual understanding, Luhmann expectations concerning the improbability of communication are pessimistic. Doomed to failure, communicators become discouraged and eventually abstain from communicating because all "these improbabilities are not only obstacles preventing a communication from reaching its target; they also function as thresholds of discouragement and lead to abstention from communication if the prospects for it are thought to be inauspicious" (1992, p. 124).

HOBBES AS A PHILOSOPHICAL PRECURSOR TO LUHMANN'S THEOREM

Despite his radicalism, Luhmann claimed no novelty for his theorem of the improbability of communication. As one of its precursors, he invoked Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) (Luhmann 1992, p. 122), but only in his *Social Systems*, does he give a hint at why the author of the *Leviathan* should have argued that communication is a problem among humans. Hobbes, as Luhmann (1995, p. 115) read him, "maintained that every human being fears all others and is thereby induced to preventive hostility, which all the more compels the other, who has been calculated into this equation, to try to get a jump on him". However, Hobbes's theory of communication cannot be reconstructed from passages in his work in which he deals with communication literally because the concept of communication was not part of his vocabulary. What he understood by communication must be reconstructed from passages in which he dealt with *understanding* and *signification*. The latter concept had a different meaning than today because only by "signifying something to someone" did Hobbes mean "communicating something to someone" (Hungerland & Vick, 1973).

Hobbes distinguished two stages of human evolution. The first is the archaic period in which humans lived in a primitive state, which Hobbes defined as the state of nature. At that time, humans did not yet have laws to distinguish moral values. Instead, decisions about good or evil were made by individuals on their own. The second stage, by contrast, was an advanced period of human culture. In it, the welfare of all humans is based on a social contract established and executed by a sovereign, who established and determined the laws, justice, social order, and moral value distinctions necessary for the welfare of all. Thus, Luhmann's reference to Hobbes cannot relate to this second phase of human evolution, for in this advanced phase of evolution, only those citizens who regressed to the archaic phase of the state of nature could be the cause of problems of communication.

The failures of human communication that Luhmann attributed to Hobbes's political philosophy could only be failures characteristic of the archaic phase of human evolution and failures caused by humans in civilized societies regressed to the state of nature. As an example of the latter kind, Hobbes enumerated the following four abuses of verbal language that result in obstacles of communication:

> (1) When men register their thoughts wrongly through inconstancy in the meanings of their words, leading them to register for their conceptions something that they never conceived, thus deceiving themselves. (2) When they use words metaphorically, that is, in senses other than the ones they are ordained to have, thereby deceiving others. (3) When by words they declare something to be what they want which isn't what they want. (4) When they use words to injure one another; for seeing that nature has enabled living creatures to injure their enemies. (Hobbes, 1651/2004, p. 12)

According to Hobbes, when a consensus on moral values is missing or when such consensus, once established, is neglected, communication must fail. Without a code of ethical values valid and accepted by all, communication must fail. It may even end in war, for

> "Good" and "evil" or "bad" are names that signify our desires and aversions, which are different in men who differ in their characters, customs, and beliefs. And men can differ not only in their judgments of the senses—concerning what is pleasant or unpleasant to the taste, smell, hearing, touch, and sight—but also judgments concerning what conforms to or disagrees with reason in the actions of common life. Indeed, one man at different times differs from himself, at one time praising (calling 'good') something that at another time he dispraises (calling it 'bad'), from which arise disputes, controversies, and at last war. (Hobbes, 1651/2004, p. 73)

This is the Hobbesian scenario of a society without moral laws, for which Luhmann claims the ancestry of his theorem of the improbability of communication. However, Luhmann's argument that his theorem of the improbability of communication applies to humans in the Hobbesian state of nature without ethical rules neglects the fact that these humans needed at least to communicate among themselves for the purpose of dispute. Dispute and disagreement is not possible without communication. How can there be disagreement without communication and interpretation about the signs that convey the value in dispute?

ETYMOLOGICAL AMBIGUITIES: INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION

Doubts about the nature of communication also present themselves in the etymology of the word *communication*. As Casalegno (2004, p. 319) observed, the root of this word raises doubts as to whether communication pertains to the logic of inclusion, presupposed for communicative processes, or to that of exclusion, which would mean a fundamental problem of communication. Pokorny's etymological dictionary of Proto-Indo-European reports that the noun *communication*, the adjective *common* and the verb *communicate* derive from the Proto-Indo-European root *mei-* (1959, p. 709-10). This root has six homonymous forms with different meanings, of which two suggest a fundamental etymological antinomy in the concept of *communication*. The principal meaning is the one of *mei*-2, which means 'to exchange' or 'to swap'. This meaning is indeed compatible with the modern concepts of *commonality* and *communication*. Another root is *mei*-1, 'to fortify'. This root is the etymological precursor of the Latin word *moenia*, 'defensive walls', 'ramparts', 'bulwarks' or 'city walls'. Descendants of this root can be found in modern English words like *munition* or *municipality*.

Hence, the root *mei-* comprises two meaning that go in opposite directions. One implies the logic of inclusion, and the other the logic of exclusion. The logic of inclusion is expressed in the etymon *mei*-2, which pertains to the semantic field of exchange and reciprocity, and can be found in the roots of the modern English word *mutual*, too. The logic of exclusion, by contrast, presents itself in the root *mei*-1, whose closest descendant is the Latin verb *communire*, which means 'to fortify on all sides'. Of course, the strange semantic incompatibility between the roots *mei*-1 and *mei*-2 has its explanation in the fact that archaic communities needed fortifications. The logic of municipal walls not only implies inclusion, the idea of a space of mutual exchange, but also exclusion, which means the impossibility

of communication with those outside this space. The ambiguity between inclusion and exclusion remains a reality in the encounter with foreigners speaking an unknown language. Communication in one's own language means the inclusion of those who speak the same language but the exclusion of those who speak the unknown idiom.

The paradox of opposite roots has other counterparts in the semantic field of words related to communication, for example in the concept of information. To inform someone, also implies both 'having' and of 'not having knowledge', namely the one before and the other after the act of communication it. It implies both a 'having' and a 'not having of knowledge *in common*'. The state of information that is not yet common is a state of exclusion, whereas shared information means a state of inclusion.

Communication, as a 'making common', thus also implies the transition from a state of privacy to one of commonality. Notice that the etymological root of the word *private*, which characterizes the state in which ideas have not yet been communicated, also implies a sense that pertains to the logic of exclusion since the verb *privare*, from which *private* is the derivation, means 'to bereave', 'to make single or apart'. Keeping knowledge private without communicating it thus connotes etymologically depriving others of knowledge. By contrast, communication as making knowledge common, as *sharing* ideas or information, connotes the logic of inclusion.

Here lies the fundamental difference between communicative exchange and economic exchange. Communication cannot be conceived according to a "postal package model", as Ponzio (1990, pp. 146-147) has pointed out. The postal sender/receiver scenario implies that senders have to give up their messages, which implies a state of exclusion. Instead, communication follows the logic of conjunction and hence inclusion, since the senders keep the object of exchange when they share their ideas with the receivers. Economic exchange, by contrast, follows the logic of disjunction, since sellers have to give up their goods and buyers need to part from whatever they give in exchange. What the exchange of goods and the exchange of ideas have in common is that neither of them implies "*equal* exchange", as Ponzio teaches (1990, pp. 185-196).

THREE OTHER DOUBTS CONCERNING THE PROBABILITY OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

Variants of the claim of the improbability of communication can also be found in twentieth-century communication theory. Three of them that will be discussed in the following are the code theoretical claim, the claim that minds

are black boxes between which no exchange is possible, and the post-structuralists and deconstructivist claim.

Doubts founded on code theories

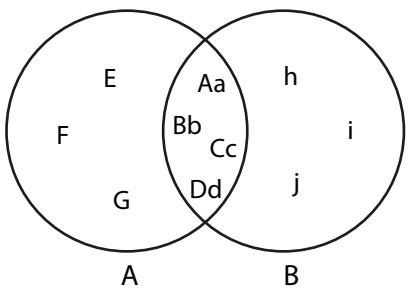
The code theoretical models of communication of the 1960s conceived codes as repertoires of signs and knowledge horizons that differ with each participant in communication. These differences were interpreted as the source of misunderstandings between the senders and receivers of messages (cf. Nöth, 2023). Shannon and Weaver's (1949) model still postulated a single common code with which the sender encodes and the receiver decodes the message. Ponzio criticized this model

> according to which messages are formulated and exchanged on the basis of a code (which has been defined and fixed antecedently with respect to the actual use of signs so that, requiring only decodification, it does not present the risk involved in interpretation), of a two-way correspondence between *signifiant* and *signifié*'. (Ponzio 1990: 275-277)

A theory based on the assumption that communication always involves at least two codes that never coincide so that communication can never be entirely felicitous was proposed by Juri Lotman (cf. Nöth, 2022). His communication model represents the codes of the sender and the receiver of a message in the form of the Venn diagram shown in Figure 1. The two sign repertoires are represented by upper, resp. lower case letters.

Figure 1

Lotman's diagram of the relation between the sign repertoires of an addresser (circle A) and an addressee (circle B).



Note. Lotman, 2009, p. 5.

Only the signs Aa, Bb, Cc and Dd in the area of the overlap between A and B represent the sign repertoire shared by both addresser and addressee. Only they make communication possible, whereas communication is doomed to fail when the signs excluded from the area of overlap (E, F, G, h, i, j) are used. Based on this diagram, Lotman (2009, p. 17) puts forward a twofold claim of the impossibility of communication: "Communication appears to be *impossible*" in the two sections of A and B which do *not* overlap, "whilst a full intersection (where A and B are deemed identical) renders communication insipid" (and hence impossible in another sense).

Lotman's solution to this apparent paradox of the impossibility of communication is that communication can only be conceived as a process of translating the untranslatable:

> The more difficult and inadequate the translation of one nonintersecting part of the space into the language of the other, the more valuable […] this paradoxical communication becomes. You could say that the translation of the untranslatable may in turn become the carrier of information of the highest degree. (Lotman 2009: 5-6)

The mind-as-a-black-box argument

The *black-box* argument does not literally state that communication is impossible, but it states that it is impossible to know whether communication is possible and whether it really takes place because the addresser has no access to addressee's mind (alias black box). Decades before the behaviorists created the myth of the black box, Peirce formulated this epistemological dilemma as follows:

> The utterer has no ideas but his own ideas, he lives no life but his own life. Let him try to specify a place in the interpreter's panorama, and he can only look over his own panorama, where he can find nothing but his own ideas. (MS 318, p. 194 [Prag. 25], 1907)

Peirce's solution to this dilemma of the impossibility of knowing what the receiver of a message understands can be found in his theory of the interpretant, the effect of the signs on its interpreters. Unlike Luhmann, Peirce argues that such effects are not inaccessible for two reasons. First, the effects of the addresser's signs on the addressee are accessible to the addresser through the verbal and nonverbal signs with which the addressees react, for example, when the latter express their understanding or misunderstanding, agreement or disagreement, verbally or nonverbally. Second, the addressers have knowledge of how signs

operate in their own minds, so that they have "no difficulty in finding the life of the interpreter" in their "ideas about it2 (ibid., p. 194). In other words, although the senders cannot read the receivers' thoughts, they can read signs that give evidence of those thoughts and know from their own semiotic experience whether or how a mind understands the message or not. Without being able to enter the receivers' minds, the senders can nevertheless form rather adequate hypotheses about how those understand the message.

The black-box argument is associated with the notable cognitive paradox recognized by Wittgenstein according to which no-one can ever know what is going on in their own brains. Wittgenstein's argument is, "But if you say: 'How am I to know what he means when I see nothing but the signs he gives?' then I say: 'How is *he* to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either?'" (1953, § 504, p. 188).

Poststructuralist and deconstructivist arguments

Other variants of the argument of the impossibility of felicitous communication can be found in post-structuralist and decontructivist discourse theories. From a social science perspective, the general tenor of poststructuralist communication theory is probably best epitomized in Michel Foucault's thesis that the ideal of the "universal communication of knowledge, the indefinite and free exchange of discourses" is "one of the great myths of European culture" (Foucault, 1981, p. 62). Free exchange of ideas has become impossible because the messages circulating in public are subject to control, prohibition, and exclusion. The reason is that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events" (Foucault 1981: 52). The impossibility of communication is thus the impossibility of *free* communication.

In various versions, the topos of the impossibility of communication became a *leitmotif* of poststructuralist writings. Roland Barthes stigmatizes the presupposition of the "purity of communication" to show that communication is "corrupted" by the plurality of discursive connotations creating a multiplicity of meanings. Communication thus always goes in step with "counter-communication" (1974: 9), and the message ultimately turns out to be a Shannon-Weaverian *noise*, as Nelson (1985: 9) has pointed out. "Noise is not outside the message, nor is it an internal supplement to the truth of the message. Noise is the semiotic process that constitutes messages; it is their substance; it is irreducible." As Barthes concluded, "Semiology would consequently be the labor which collects the

impurity of language, the waste of linguistics, the immediate corruption of the message" (1982: 470).

Julia Kristeva provided a Lacanian psychoanalytic poststructuralist perspective on the impossibility of communication. Instead of communication, she can only discern *self-communication*: "Each speaking subject is both the addresser and the addressee of his own message […]. The message intended for the other is, in a sense, first intended for the one who is speaking: whence it follows that to speak is to speak to oneself" (1989: 10).

Perhaps the climax of poststructuralist anticommunicational theories is Baudrillard's theory of the *impossibility of exchange* in general: communication is impossible because words have become empty "and signs no longer have any force of meaning" (2001: 5). What Baudrillard does not say is what the meaning of those signs was once, when they were not yet empty (cf. Nöth 2003).

The reasons why Derrida claims that communication is impossible are well elucidated in Chang's *Deconstruction Communication* (1996). It is impossible to reach any consensus on whatever a message means, because its meanings are always *deferred* in the course of its reading, so that they necessarily escape any possible "definition". An "implosion" of the idea of communicability has occurred because "Derrida redescribes communication as an unbridled play of differences, substitutions, and displacements taking place at the limit of signification". He teaches us that "our sense of uncertainty comes naturally and inevitably from the very nature of our linguistic being, that we are always and already at the mercy of peripatetic signs" (Chang 1996: 187).

THE PERFORMATIVE PARADOX AND ITS SOLUTION

Skeptics of the theorem of the improbability of communication can certainly be excused for never having been concerned with the question whether communication is probable or not, for asking whether one *can* communicate means creating a *performative paradox*. To ask the question whether communication is possible is to perform a speech act, but speech acts presuppose speakers who communicate. This is even so if the addresser and the addressee are the same person, since communication includes also "self-communication", as Peirce, Lotman, as well as Ponzio (1999, p. 8) teach. Now, if asking a question is communicating, then asking in addition whether we communicate or not constitutes a paradox. However, why has this question been raised in so many variants?

The question whether communication is probable or can only be a rhetorical question, formulated to substantiate the argument that we do not communicate

in the sense in which the term *communication* is conceived according to some theories of communication.

With this in mind, we can also find some arguments in Ponzio's writings supporting the provocative thesis that communication is unlikely. For example, Ponzio argues that we cannot communicate in the sense in which information theory and the classical code theory of communication have defined communication. He has also argued against the assumption that communication means *equal exchange* (1990, pp. 185-188). The ordinary belief that speakers communicate a message A to listeners who also interpret it as A, Ponzio argues that communication is a process of *unequal* exchange, in which message A is transformed into a message B and B into C, in an endless chain of semiotic growth.

The impossibility of reading the thoughts of other mind is, in fact, the very origin of communication, because if the addresser could read the thoughts of the addressee, communication would be unnecessary. M

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