

Book Review  
Cognitive Pragmatics.  
The Mental Processes of Communication

Bruno Bara  
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*Roberta Cocco*<sup>†</sup>  
roberta.cocco14@gmail.com

In *Cognitive Pragmatics. The Mental Processes of Communication*, published by the MIT Press in 2010 and translated from Italian into English by John Douthwaite, Bruno Bara takes a cognitive perspective, investigating communication through different viewpoints (neuroscience, anthropology, pragmatics, psychology, philosophy, theory of games) in the six chapters constituting the book. In his preface, Bara defines communication as a conscious, deliberate and cooperative activity, in which two or more agents together construct meaning. Every communicative encounter is an activity and an enterprise: successes and failures are equally distributed among the participants.

In the first chapter, *Not Just Language: A Taxonomy of Communication*, Bara translates Paul Grice's philosophy (Grice, 1989) into his own theory: As Grice wrote, "if A wishes to say something by means of a given behaviour, A must have the intention of bringing about a given effect in her interlocutor, an effect that is realized at least in part thanks to the fact that the hearer recognises that the speaker intends to convey something to him" (p. 16). He concludes that we can speak of communication when there is mutual wilfulness. Communication is a process (not a product) and communicating involves two different ways of processing data: the same input may be analyzed from a linguistic and from an extralinguistic standpoint. Specifically, linguistic communication is *compositional* and *systematic*: it enables an infinite productivity of lexical meanings and the possibility of spatial-temporal displacement thanks to particular indicators of reference. On the contrary,

<sup>†</sup> Theories and Methodologies of e-Learning and Media Education, University of Padua, Italy.

extralinguistic communication is *associative* and *non-compositional*: every extralinguistic signal is independent, like a molecular block that cannot be decomposed any further, productivity and spatial-temporal displacement are limited.

Extralinguistic communication, more related to the emotional dimension, is an attempt to change others' mental states. Specific rules of extralinguistic communication are innate (recognition of basic emotions) or refer to channels of perception (recognition of danger), whilst other specific rules of linguistic communication are genetically and culturally determined. These rely on syntax, semantics and pragmatics levels: they allow an effective comprehension and production of language. In particular, *cognitive pragmatics* investigates the correlations between the mental processes involved in communication and those areas of the brain that are responsible for those processes. The key concept at the roots of pragmatics is the *speech act*. John Austin (1962) notes that in precisely given situations, certain utterances modify the world in the same way as the actions do. If performatives modify the world in the desired direction, they may be successful ("felicity conditions"), otherwise they will fail. Considering speech acts as actions, Austin affirms that a speech act could be: a) *locutionary act*: what is said b) *illocutionary act*: what is done in saying something; c) *perlocutionary act*: what one wants to achieve saying something. Success of one of these steps does not mean that the next stage will necessarily have the same outcome.

Communication is based on general principles, available for each type of communicative production: a) *common attention*: a partner must understand as expressive the actions of the actor that tries to establish a communication with him; b) *communicative intentionality*: communication is always conscious and intentional; c) *communication is symbolic*: we build together the meaning of an action, which becomes communicative act when we assign a meaning; d) *shared beliefs*: the effectiveness of communication is based on knowledge progressively shared by the actors; e) *conversation*: priority, turns and coherence must be adequately respected; f) *cultural dependency*: communicative acts must be compatible with culture; g) *linguistic and extralinguistic functional systems*: there are two ways to achieve communication, not competitive but joined together, with common purposes; h) *cooperation*: the significance of the interaction is agreed between the agents.

Communication is a cooperative activity and it is interesting to think language as a game: Bara analyzes this concept in depth in the second chapter of the book, *Tools for Communicating*. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953, part I, remark 7) was the first to define “the entire process of using words” as a linguistic game. The aim of using the word “game” is to remark the fact that speaking a language is part of an asset, a “way of life”. The revolutionary idea is that one should focus on language use instead of language form. Indeed, communication takes place at two levels: the *informational content* and the *relational message* (the non-verbal part: attitude, tone of voice, gestures) (cf. Bateson, 1979). The relationship between players is the primary element taken into consideration before accepting or not a proposal of game. In addition, the game is played if the actors are really interested to play (and to comply with the rules that specify what is appropriate to ask or to answer). An objective game (G) does not exist, but each agent has her own subjective vision of the game. Therefore: G (A, B) represents game G viewed from A’s standpoint, while G (B,A) represents the same game G, viewed from B’s standpoint. The response of B to perform or not the action that A requests him, can be: *linguistic or not* (for example, B does not answer), *acceptance*, or *rejection* (for example, B refuses to play the game that A expects).

In the third chapter, *Behavior Games and Conversation Games*, Bara introduces two different types of games. *Behavior Games* are the structure coordinates actors use to select the actual meaning of a sentence among many possible meanings. As argued in Airenti, Bara, and Colombetti (1993), a behavior game between X and Y is an action plan that is shared by X and Y. The shared knowledge required for two agents to be able to interact in the same game may be a combination of tacit and explicit knowledge. A behavior game must respect three conditions of validity: 1) *Time*: behavior games cannot be activated at any moment. In some cases, temporal conditions are not rigid, for example asking a road information does not require a temporal bond. 2) *Place*: behavior games provide a place of activation where various moves are possible. For instance, behavior games in a professional context often have very strict constraints of time and place. Of course, there are exceptions: some professionals such as doctors must work at any time. 3) *Other conditions* (related to the mental states of the participants, for example manner, sequence, effect): some behavior games require particular conditions related to the specific aspects of the games themselves. For instance, a person wishing to hire a car must have a driver’s license and a credit card (validity conditions).

*Conversation games* are sets of tasks and moves that each participant involved in a conversation must perform in a specific context. Conversation games manage the dialogue, a sequence of speech acts performed by two or more. What is the structure of a dialogue? Each speech can be divided into four phases: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio* and *actio*. *Inventio* is the orator's inventive research of all the arguments and persuasion tools related to the theme of her speech. *Dispositio* is the internal organization of speech (its scheme) which follows the order given to the topics. *Elocutio* is the structure of the speech, linguistically organized on the base of *inventio* and *dispositio*. In this phase non-literal language (ex. metaphor and irony) appear. *Actio* is the actual recitation of the speech, vocal, mimic and gestural effects included.

As discussed in the fourth chapter, *Generation and Comprehension of Communication Acts*, another relevant aspect in a conversation is the *communicative effect*, a set of all the states of mind acquired and modified as a result of communicative intentions expressed by the actor. The actor A should attempt the best method – depending on the personality of B – to reach the desired effect, satisfying B. What “expedients” does the actor use? In the model of communicative effect introduced by Airenti, Bara, and Colombetti (1993), six concepts are particularly important: correctness, motivation, having a plan, and sincerity are involved in attributing intention and (specifically, the fourth one) beliefs; ability and informedness are involved in the process of adjustment.

So far, Bara discussed standard communication, but in the fifth chapter, *Nonstandard Communication*, he points out that there are also interesting cases of non-standard communication, which can be classified under four headings: 1) *non-expressive interaction*: emission of a statement without there being any intention to express the mental state associated; 2) *failure*: unsuccessful attempt to achieve the desired communicative effect; 3) *deception*: the attempt to communicate a mental state that is not really possessed, in other words, a conscious violation of a shared behavior game; 4) *exploitation*: the special use of a particular communication rule to achieve a communicative effect that is different from the normal effect associated with that rule.

The most frequent cases of exploitation are as-if situations, metaphor, understatement, hyperbole, and irony. For instance, in irony the speaker implicitly or explicitly echoes an antecedent situation or an expectance by reporting what that other person said (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The echoic

nature of an ironic utterance reminds the listener of a failed expectation or violated social norm. A final aspect which is often unnoticed – but its importance is, on the contrary, absolute and considerable – is silence. For instance, Western culture tends to obsessively fill the silences, while for Native Americans the norm is to remain quiet unless one has something essential to say. We have become accustomed to permanent background noise, so that we are surprised when we no more hear it. However, silence is our natural background, not words. Against a background of silence, words acquire value without needing to be repeated. There would not be communication without silence.

In the sixth chapter, *Communication Competence*, Bara argues that communication, from a cognitive point of view, is a mental act: the mental states, emotional, cognitive, conscious or unconscious and the psychic processes are produced by the brain. The theory of cognitive pragmatics is then structured on three levels: 1) Darwinian-oriented arguments about the evolution of communication from animals to humans (phylogeny); 2) experimental reflection concerning both the emergence of communicative competence in children and its physiological, pathological or traumatic decay (ontogeny); 3) the correlation between mental processes of communication and brain functions.

The basic idea of evolutionary psychology is that mind is a product of the evolutionary process and thus every component has been shaped by natural selection. Humans use an open system of communication: the basic units of human language are the letters of the alphabet and the signs of ideograms, then the possibilities of composition are infinite. The invention of writing makes the stabilization of external cognition possible, starting up, in this way, the cultural transgenerational development. External cognition permits the use of markers present in the environment to support the cognitive activity, easing the mental processes from cognitive load. Cognition is also *embodied*, i.e. our intellectual abilities are also connected a specific body, with its particular features. Only hominids have the brain (*internal cognition*), the appropriate environment (*external cognition*), and the physical characteristics (*embodied cognition*), allowing to develop their communicative competences.

Human specificity is not a general communicative ability, but the specific linguistic communicative ability. Linguistic competence is concrete, not abstract and theoretical. Language is normally located in the contralateral hemisphere to the dominant hand, although in both hemispheres there are

areas subject to its operation. Since the birth there exists a communicative competence subdivided into linguistic and extralinguistic structures, which are located in different areas of the brain, with non-simultaneous maturation, although both areas can use common cognitive resources and interact continuously. The extralinguistic channel matures and is used first (relationship maternal attachment-caregiver, emotional and cognitive relations with others). Linguistic communication requires more resources and emerges around the first year. Once the linguistic competence is finally revealed (after 2-3 years), it is dominant when compared to the extralinguistic competence, except for certain types of communication (emotions). Two different pragmatic competences could be hypothesized: a purely linguistic one, typically analytical, which allows to manage the basic speech acts (statements, questions and orders), and a central one, typically synthetic, represented by rules relating to “things that are done with the words,” needed to conduct complex speech acts (indirect, deception and sarcasm). These two types of pragmatic competences are respectively localized in the left hemisphere and in the right hemisphere. The central ability is described as the more interesting for cognitive pragmatics.

In this book, Bara examines and describes both standard and non-standard communication, communicative competence, language as a linguistic game, conversation games, the general principles of communication, proposing an attractive framework not only to cognitive scientists, but also to linguists, anthropologists and psychologists. In a reader-friendly way, the author grounded is theory on the intuitions of major philosophers of language, such as Wittgenstein, Austin and Grice. At the same time, he presents a well-argued proposal, combining both a strong evolutionary-theoretical perspective and a good discussion of experimental data.

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