Rhetoric and Ideology in Communication Today: A Semioethic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how the concept of communication is reconsidered under two aspects, theoretical and historical-social relatively to today’s world. The first: communication cannot be reduced to a process of exteriorisation according to a limited view of communication. This contrasts with global semiotics (Sebeok) and the fact that being, life is communication. The second: with respect to economic reality, the industrial revolution of automation, globalisation of communication, universalisation of the market, communication in the production, exchange, consumption cycle is present in all three phases and not only in exchange. The dominant communication-production system tends to present itself through massmedial communication, and through the rhetoric of its ideo-logic as the only system possible, to maintain and reproduce at all costs, despite its openly destructive character. Semiotics must cultivate a global vision, which as semioethics and in a “semio-dialogic” perspective will interrogate dominant ideo-logic and propose new forms of living together.

KEYWORDS

Communication, Dialogics, Ideologics, Production, Semioethics

1. COMMUNICATION AND PRODUCTION

We wish to start by denouncing a fallacy concerning the concept of communication in certain theories of the sign, and say first of all that the word “rhetoric” in our title has a negative value, meaning deceitful and biased argumentation.

The concept of communication needs to be reconsidered under two aspects, one theoretical, the other historical-social relative to present day reality. We will begin from the second considering that all theories are generally connected to the historico-social reality in which they are formulated and which affects them. A concept that intends to be faithful to the reality it refers to must keep account of the latter and fundamentally of its potential for transformation and innovation.

Up until recent times and according to “classical” conceptions of the economic science, communication in economic reality indicates exchange, the exchange of merchandise and consequently the market. According to the traditional formula, communication in the production cycle, “production-exchange-consumption” is central, not only in the sense of position, but also in terms of value. In fact, the productive cycle begins over and again firstly if the object-merchandise is purchased, and secondly if it has been consumed.

Now for the other aspect we intend to examine: generally, the concept of ‘communication’ is understood as a process of exteriorisation through which an interior content is made manifest. On this account, communication is an e-mission that starts from a being, the e-mitter, and takes place between

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the e-mitter considered as a *terminus a quo* and another being (the receiver) considered as a *terminus ad quem*. Communication is what happens between one being in the role of emitter and another being in the role of receiver. According to this model we have a being that communicates, that first is and then communicates, a being that exists prior to and independently of its acts of communication.

Not only is this conception of communication widespread in everyday opinion, but it is also shared by otherwise very different theoretical positions (e.g., innatism and empiricism, mentalism and behaviourism). In any case, the conception of communication as the e-mission from a being which another being receives remains unquestioned.

This conception of communication is obviously connected to a given conception of being, to a given ontology. Just as communication in general is considered as a process beginning from a being, as an e-mission of being, being in general is considered as the presupposition and foundation of communication. Communication theory and ontology are in general closely connected: all communication theories have their ontologies, whether explicit or implicit; conversely, all ontologies have a theory of communication, even if it is not explicated.

Against this mistaken interpretation of communication, we can very simply say that there is no being before communication, but that ‘communication is being.’ Given that communication concerns the whole organic world, Thomas Sebeok (2001a, b) claims as a central axiom in the framework of his global semiotics that communication is life and that living beings do not subsist without communication. But here our focus is on human social reality. Consequently, we will consider communication in the sphere of our economic reality (see also Chomsky 1995, 1999; Danesi, Petrilli, Ponzio 2004).

In capitalist production today, economics confirms that being and communication identify with each other. The current phase is characterised by the industrial revolution of automation, globalisation of communication and universalisation of the market in spite of delusive attempts at curtailing the market with walls and boundaries with protectionist functions (see Ponzio 2009). This universalisation is not only a quantitative fact of expansion, but above all a qualitative transformation represented by the fact that anything can be translated into goods and by the continuous production of new goods.

What we must realize today when we study communication, whether in studies on human social signs, or in the sphere of the economic sciences is that today, as is evident, communication is no longer just an intermediate phase in the production cycle (production, exchange, consumption). Instead, communication now represents the constitutive modality of production and consumption processes themselves. The current phase is characterised by the industrial revolution of automation, globalisation of communication and universalisation of the market. This phase in capitalistic reproduction can be characterised as the ‘communication-production’ phase.

The whole system of social reproduction is made possible by communication and, therefore, by signs, verbal and nonverbal signs. One of the tasks (among others) that semiotics is called to carry out in the present day and age is to examine signs as a constituent part of the processes they belong to. Such an approach puts into evidence the effective connection between communication and ideology — and between the disciplines that deal with them both at the foundational level as well as at the level of general theory: semiotics as the general theory of signs and as theory of ideology (see Petrilli & Ponzio 2000a, b, 2005, 2007, 2016).

To examine communication in the processes of social reproduction to which it belongs, means not only to consider communication in relation to the systems of sign exchange, but also of sign production and consumption. And as part of the totality of social reproduction, ideology must also be viewed in its necessary relationship with sign systems. Certainly, an important question concerns the way we pick out the tricks used by false reasoning to seem true or at least valid and acceptable. As to this question, a good basis and repertoire to begin with is no doubt Perelman’s and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s (1966) famous treatise on argumentation. But we wish to recall yet another far more ancient work which Peirce too studied very closely — Peter of Spain’s *Tractatus or Summule logicales* (see *Peter of Spain 1972, 1985*). By comparison with other Medieval books in logic, the latter has the merit of
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