A History of Communication Theory and the Question of Transcendentalism

Chapter One

The world from which I part at death is, in another aspect, only my idea.
— A. Schopenhauer

I couldn't make out what language they were speaking,
And nothing shone except fine brass
And reflections from lazy horse-shoes
On the toneless Sunday side-roads.
— Osip Mandelstam, *The Lutheran*

1. Traditions and disciplines in communication theory

Compared with other human and social sciences, communication theory appears to be of recent origin. Appearances deceive, however, for the antecedents of this growing field of work can be found in the classic philosophical treatises of western and non-western thinkers including Plato, Sextus Empiricus and Lao Tzu, reaching forward through the works of St. Augustine, Boethius, Averroës, St. Anselm and Ockham before arriving at the modern age. Following Wittgenstein’s linguistic turn and Husserl’s phenomenology of intersubjectivity in the early decades of the twentieth century, we arrive at the fertile plains of semiotics, information theory, pragmatics and dialogism out of which communication theory has grown. However, an unresolved and historically non-coincidental tension remains between the implicit transcendental claims of much of communication theory – reference, understanding, *sharedness* – and our experiences of risk, uncertainty and dissolution in what an eminent sociologist has recently described as our ‘liquid age’. With serious questions being asked about the extent of our shared realities and understandings and
as communication theory matures, it is now an opportune moment to reflect on what form a *detranscendentalised* theory of communication actors and contexts might take. In bringing intentions, understandings, meanings and interactions down to earth this book invites its readers to account for the complexities across communications, actors and social processes without recourse to transcendental theories of understanding. I shall explain these terms below. May the reader furrow his brow at this point and sustain it for a while.

Communication Theory is a wide-ranging field whose reach extends across the human and social sciences to the arts and humanities. It embraces social psychology and media theory, logic and pragmatics, epistemology and social theory. And it could also be argued that if it is actually in some way a ‘field’, in possession of a measure of coherence, it has rested on its laurels, with apparently little regard now for discussion of the foundational issues without which it runs the risk of peddling incantations of faith. For surely dialogue, understanding, meaning, intention and reception have long since ceased to be questioned in communication studies while in pragmatics, logic and literary theory they have been the object of thorough questioning for many years. These questions touch on the relationship between language and thought, language and reality, on ‘reality’ itself, on speaker intention and hearer reception, on the nature of the communicative sign, of meaning and of what it is we exchange when we engage in interaction. What is dialogue? What is communication? What is meaning? What unites and separates us? Do we actually share anything at all other than our mortality? A vast wealth of theories engages with these questions and most of them actually fall outside communication studies or media studies or the mainstream approaches to communication theory. In his well-known 1999 conspectus, Robert T. Craig, following Anderson’s (1996) audit, listed no fewer than 249 communication theories. Craig’s antidote to this emerging coherence from such a multitude of approaches, which he associates with the risk of a ‘sterile eclecticism’, is to embark on the quest for ‘dialogical-dialectical coherence’ that sidesteps facile models of communication as either linear transmission of a code to recipients or as constitutive processes of socially relevant and meaningful interaction. His working assumption is that communication theory (let the shorthand suffice for now) stems from everyday communication practices and ‘derives much of its plausibility and interest by appealing rhetorically to commonplaces of everyday practical metadiscourse’ (Craig, 1999: p. 129). The role of theory is
thus to use ‘reasonably abstract, explicitly reasoned, normative idealisations of communication’ (Craig, 1999: p. 130). The theoretical reflections contained in this study are not explicitly concerned with reasonableness, for there are occasions when a certain degree of complexity can only be removed at the cost of reductionist over-simplification. Nor are these reflections explicitly to do with normative idealisations but with looking upon theories of communication, that fundamentally human act, with a questioning attitude. That attitude is not anti-empirical for even the most abstract theory does not float freely above the clouds. In this process, it might well be that the task of ‘applying’ falls to others, even if the reflections in this study are, in fact, experientially rooted.

Let us return for now to the appeal of Craig’s normative idealisation. Theories of language and theories of communication emerge from at least two powerful paradigms. Let these paradigms be known as epistemologies or discourses. These epistemologies and discourses are not of recent provenance: they do not arise with the linguistic turn of the early twentieth century or indeed with the logic of John Locke. They are intertextually embedded in discourses which stretch much further back in time, exemplified by Plato’s dialogues, and also by the pre-Socratics, but also by other traditions that have remained outside communication theory to this day. To be sure, there needs to be discussion of such well-established recent points of reference as symbolic interactionism of the late nineteenth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, theories of semiotics/semiology, intertextuality and dialogism, phenomenology, speech act theory and (universal) pragmatics. Broadly speaking, a narrow definition of the field of communication studies thus makes it a twentieth century phenomenon – indeed perhaps one that acquired a manifest form in the 1940s when information theory emerged and when propaganda and persuasion and the encoding and decoding of encryptions started to concern war-time security services. It is not that the above should not be covered in a book on communication theory; it is just that the twentieth century did not erupt without a prehistory. Here, the roots of communication theory lie – in some of its unspoken assumptions and beliefs and even articles of faith. We might be inclined to go back as far as Gottlob Frege’s logic for surely no communication theory could be considered complete without an understanding of the connections between logic, language and communication. Then again, it would surely be impossible to neglect insights such as ‘every man has so in-
violable a liberty, to make words stand for what idea he pleases’ – and, quite remarkably, these take us back to the seventeenth century. And Locke’s work, too, was a multi-faceted response to the work of medieval and ancient philosophy – of Anselm and Ockham, Boethius and St. Augustine, Aristotle and Plato. We may appear to be some distance from blog theory or the dialogical self or uncertainty and communication.

To rediscover some of the foundational questions of communication theory today, we will ultimately need to go as far back in the western tradition as Plato’s *Cratylus* (ca. 360 BC). Here, Socrates argues that names are inherently correct whilst for one of his interlocutors, Hermogenes, names are derived from convention and agreement among users. Socrates traces correct or true speech back in time to the ‘correctness of the earliest names’ and yet this chronology cannot be traced back to the first communications of man and is instead sublimated as an originary correctness that escapes us – the origins of true speech lie with the gods: ‘the first men who gave names were no ordinary persons, but high thinkers and great talkers’ (*Cratylus*: 401C). Even if users can insert letters for the purposes of euphony (a particular attribute of women, according to Socrates), the earliest, divine names are irreducible; true language thus does not emerge with the early hominids but pre-exists us. For Socrates, ‘[…] the true part is smooth and divine and dwells aloft among the gods, but falsehood dwells among common men, is rough and like the tragic goat’ (*Cratylus*: 408C). The Stoics also wrote about the relationship between naturalism (correspondence of language and reality) and sceptical accounts and between the internal word and the word as it is uttered. As Lia Formigari notes in *A History of Language Philosophies*, there are two extreme responses to the naturalist argument: the sceptical argument in the works of Sextus Empiricus, and the theolinguistic argument in the works of Plotinus. For the former, even if language could not be reduced to a norm, it was still socially constitutive, whereas for Plotinus the language of the soul is fragmented and the language of the gods unified (Formigari, 2004: p. 33). In *Against the Logicians* Sextus Empiricus surveys the logical theories of the pre-Socratic philosophers, invoking the Sophist Gorgias:

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2. See Grant, 2007.
And even if [the existent – CG] should be apprehended, it is incommunicable to another person. For if the existent things are objects, externally existing, of vision and of hearing and of the senses in general, and of these the visible things are apprehensible by sight and the audible by hearing, and not conversely, - how, in this case, can these things be indicated to another person? For the means by which we indicate is speech, and speech is not the real and existent thing [...]. (Against the Logicians I: 83–85)

With even greater scepticism Democritus (460–370 BC) had argued that things that are apprehended appear to us only in our opinion. Only atoms and the void are the proof that things exist: ‘Sensible objects are conventionally assumed and opined to exist, but they do not truly exist, but only the atoms and the void’ (cited in Against the Logicians I: 135–136). Ultimately, Sextus Empiricus rejects both Democritus and Plato in his tolerance of inexact terms in a theory of speech ‘which does not seek after what is true, but what is supposed to be true’ (Against the Logicians II: 129–130); further, speech does not actually exist since it is either ‘coming to be or silenced’. Thus, in the statement that one is sowing a cloak, the cloak is mere potential until it is finished, on which point the act of sowing is complete and the act of asserting the sowing silent. This account of the naming paradox is developed further in the classification of the sign (semeion) into four categories, namely the manifest and three classes of the non-evident: the naturally non-evident (‘everlastingly hidden away’, the temporarily non-evident (occluded by external factors) and the absolutely non-evident such as the ‘stars and the grains of sand in Libya’ (Against the Logicians II: 146–148). For his ontological framework, Sextus Empiricus asserted that proof itself is a sign while that truth is a relative value existent only in our conceptualisations. And so we arrive at a relativistic account of language as the understanding that uncertainty and indeterminacy are the pores of signs which should ‘possess such significations as we may determine’: ‘The premiss, then, which contains the sign and the thing signified, as it ends in what is non-evident, is of necessity uncertain. For that it begins with truth is known, but it ends in the unknown’ (Against the Logicians I: 202; 268–269).

Whereas Plato, through Socrates, would bemoan the indeterminacies of language, Lao Tzu (sixth century BC) ‘drifts with it’. Bosley argues that when Lao Tzu wrote, ‘[t]he Way that can be spoken of/Is not the constant way;/The name that can be named/Is not the constant name’ (Tao Te Ching, 1963: p. 5), the warning his aphorism contained might be against ‘a misalignment
between discourse and the world, the slippery path that Dao creates or, third, the slippery thing that discourse itself is [...] In the fourth century BC, the Taoist philosopher and disciple of Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, like Socrates, wrote of the divine provenance of language for language that ‘flows constantly over, as from a full goblet, is in accord with God’ (Chuang Tzu, 1926: p. 266):

All things spring from germs. Under many diverse forms these things are ever being reproduced. Round and round, like a wheel, no part of which is more the starting point than any other. This is called the equilibrium of God. And he who holds the scales is God. (Chuang Tzu 1926: p. 267)

Already the die is cast in the earliest philosophical writings in East and West – between the sublime Word of the gods (and there were many) and the desublimated words of the inhabitants of the earth. And yet surely this range of antecedents takes us in too many disparate connections that are, for the student or researcher, strictly speaking, too far removed from the core task. And yet without an exploration in the genealogy of theories of language we run the risk of succumbing to an exercise in the here and now of strategic communication or intercultural communication or organisational, political or digital communication. And we also run the risk of asserting assumptions about meanings, intentions, dialogues, inferences, intersubjectivity and related concepts without an awareness of the very real historical antecedents that stretch back into the origins of ancient Chinese, Indian, Iranian and Greek philosophies. No-one would seriously question the intellectual enterprise of a theory of language. Why then should anyone question the intellectual enterprise of a theory of communication that needs a higher level of historical consciousness of its deep-lying influences?

Formigari writes that the imbrication of the internal and the uttered, external word was already the object of the reflections of the Stoics (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus and Seneca), the theolinguistics of Plotinus and the medieval theory of the three orations – scripta, prolata, mentalis (Formigari, 2004: pp. 28–29). That theolinguistic tradition lived on through the canonical interpretations of Aristotle in Boethius’s De Interpretatione (480–525 AD),

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and in the Islamic tradition as embodied by Al Farabi (870–950), Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna, 980–1037) and Ibn Rushd (Averroës, 1128–1198). Medieval semantic theory remained ‘closely interwoven’ with a universalist philosophy (Formigari, 2004: p. 65). Philosophical reflection on the internal word and the uttered word and on language and silence continued into the medieval age in St. Anselm’s (1033–1109) *Monologion*. This work is the classical theolinguistic account of the utterance as the Word of the supreme substance or God. Anselm proposes three types of utterance or word: the word as a perceptible sign for others, the utterance brought about by thinking imperceptibly the externally perceptible signs, and a third category which is irreducible to either of the first two types. This third category is the natural word or concept (source) of universal validity (the ‘same among many peoples’):

> By not using these signs at all […] but rather by saying the things themselves inwardly in our mind by either a corporeal image or an understanding of reason that corresponds to the diversity of the things themselves. (*Monologion*: p. 23)

Natural words suffice to know a thing: either a thing is known and thus known in a natural word or it is unknown and thus not capable of being captured in natural words (‘where natural words are impossible, no other word will serve to make a thing known’). The correspondence between knowable thing and natural word is proof positive of the correspondence between the utterance and knowability of things and between utterance and the very origins of things – that is in the supreme substance or God; the utterance is said to be ‘consubstantial’ with God. For, we can read in *Monologion*, God made things ‘through his innermost utterance’ (*Monologion*: p. 23; p. 25):

> Thus, the word of the supreme truth, who himself is also the supreme truth, experiences no gain or loss depending on whether he is more or less like creatures; instead, it must be the case that every created thing is so much greater and more excellent the more it is like him who supremely exists and is supremely great. (*Monologion*: p. 50)

The *Monologion* is an important landmark in the history of transcendental theolinguistics for it is here that Anselm elaborates a theory of the divine Word based on consubstantialism and essentialism. The utterance and god are one and the same or ‘consubstantial’, ‘since for the supreme spirit there is no difference between knowing and understanding or uttering’. The divine
utterance is an organic Word that is at once the reason, the singularity and the essence of the maker. The essentialism of his account lies in the fact that the word (Word) of Anselm’s God is not a likeness of things but their essence and truth, not a thought of the words that signify, but what happens when the things per se are examined. These natural words are essences and shared across humankind as a universal truth. Thus the Word and the supreme maker admit of an ‘ineffable plurality’ for they are consubstantial and yet ‘the supreme spirit does not exist from the word, whereas the Word exists from him’ (Monologion: p. 55; p. 23; p. 57) and removed from our knowledge for it is knowledge of created substances rather than substances in the process of being created and it is a likeness that ‘falls short of their essence [...]’ (Monologion: p. 56). The aporias of theolinguistic universalism are here revealed: transcendence is purchased at the expense of human agency. Relations between truth, knowledge, language are constructed ultimately on the basis of divine assertibility. Is it the case, centuries on, that transcendental theories of semantics, pragmatics or dialogism in its pragmatic or psychological variants continue, ultimately, to rest on an assertion of truth which is reached only through an acceptance of the truth claim? And if so, is that claim a strategic discourse move.

In Averroës’ enormously influential twelfth century appreciation of Aristotle’s De Interpretatione there is an uneasy reconciliation of pragmatic conventionalism and universal transcendentalism in the treatment of a theory of meaning. The argument is made that meanings are derived from conventions rather than nature and yet at the same time ideas ‘in the soul’ are ‘one and the same for all people’ (Averroës, 1998: p. 125). A theory of truth is quickly superimposed on this theory of meaning since affirmations and negations, a product of truth and falsehood, are not external to the soul, but dwell within it. Averroës’ truth theory rests on the principle of bivalence for ‘individual opposites are always divided into truth and falsehood’ that ‘conform to existence outside the soul’ (Averroës, 1998: p. 139; p. 147). The only prospect for the subversion of this principle comes in the form of subordinates where a negation or affirmation is qualified in some way (through such terms as ‘certain’); here, both contrary opposites can be true. In passing, it is worth noting that Averroës acknowledges the category of ‘indeterminate’ opposites where terms are predicated on more than one thing. Attention will return to indeterminacy and Boethius’ lament on the ‘universal uncertainty of human fortune’ in Chapter Four below. Averroës’ commitments to bivalence and transcendentalism entail a particular account of the concept of contingency or a certain
type of modal inflection (the other being the necessary). On the one hand, possible things divide in indefinite manner into truth and falsehood while on the other ‘many repugnant things result when we eliminate the nature of the possible and maintain all future matters are necessary’ (Averroës, 1998: p. 145). The account of contingency does nothing to dilute the commitment to bivalence since a future untrue thing cannot be made to exist:

And that follows from truth and falsehood in itself definitely being in one of the two opposites. That is because it is not permissible for what is not true to be brought into existence, either by way of affirmation or by way of negation. (Averroës, 1998: p. 142)

William of Ockham’s *Summa Logicae* (1349) separates categorematic from syncategorematic terms. The former terms also have definite and determinate significations while none of the latter has definite or determinate signification. Examples include ‘every’ and ‘all’. He further distinguishes between connotative and absolute names where the connotative term is ‘one that signifies one thing primarily and another thing secondarily’ (*Summa Logicae*, 1974: p. 69). By contrast, no absolute name e.g. fire, earth, heaven has a ‘nominal definition’. Then there are names of first and second imposition where names of second imposition are those of conventionalised signs and those of first imposition are names of a first or second intention. First intention terms are described as being not an intention of the soul while second intention terms are of the soul. Ockham continues with his dichotomies with a theory of universal categories. Following the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna Ockham writes: ‘[…] a spoken word, which is numerically one quality, is a universal; it is a sign conventionally appointed for the signification of many things’ (*Summa Logicae*, 1974: p. 79).

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4 The works of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann made the concept of contingency a sociologically salient one (Grant, 2007), but it originates with the concepts ‘endekhesthai’/ ‘o endekhomenon’ in Aristotle’s *Prior and Post Analytics*. In the ‘Preliminary Discussion of the Contingent’ in the *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle describes the concept as being neither necessary nor impossible (‘that which is necessary but the supposition of which entails nothing impossible’ (*Prior and Post Analytics*: 32a19–20). There is a direct connection between this definition of the term as comprising the ‘usual but not necessary’ and the indefinite on the one hand and late twentieth century inflections of the term as uncertainty.