

# Who is Talking?

## Some Remarks on Nonhuman Agency in Communication

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# Who is Talking?: Some Remarks on Nonhuman Agency in Communication

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*Non-human agency has become an increasingly important issue in communication theory. While the approach proposed by the Montreal School (Cooren, 2010; Cooren, Matte, Benoit-Barné, & Brummans, 2013) has advanced research in the subject to a remarkable degree, it does not take reflexivity of actors into account. On the one hand, this makes the identification of actors to a certain degree arbitrary and the concept of actors too wide. On the other hand, it underestimates actors as it neglects actors' capacity to propose their own ontology. In order to cope with these issues while maintaining the notion of non-human agency as proposed by Cooren and others, I would like to propose a de-ontologized notion of communication and agency based on the work of Gotthard Günther (e.g. 1976a, 1979a) and Niklas Luhmann (1995).*

Keywords: Ventriloquism, Agency, Systems Theory, Non-Human Agency, Communicative Constitution of Organizations,

## Who is talking? Some remarks on non-human agency in communication<sup>i</sup>

### 1 Introduction

Communication theory usually conceptualizes communication as something that occurs between human beings (Craig, 1999). Agency, in this regard, is something directly linked to human intentionality. Within these traditions, the Montreal School was the first to introduce the notion of non-human agency (e.g. Cooren, 2010). Following Latour (1981), Cooren (2004; 2006) points out that texts, special arrangements, and artifacts act. This idea goes hand in hand with a very flat theory of agency, defining agents as those things and persons that make a difference in a situation (Castor, 2006; Cooren, 2005). While this approach to communication is appealing, the notion of agency as proposed by Cooren raises the question of selection: In every situation, there is an infinite number of differences – how do we know which differences make a difference (Bateson, 1972)? While advocating the idea of the Montreal School to include systematically non-human agency in communication theories, this article argues that the underlying theoretical design needs to include the concept of reflexivity – otherwise the identification of actors may become arbitrary, such that drawing a theoretical distinction between action and actor becomes difficult, and the communication is largely reduced to causal forces. This article introduces a theory of communication drawing on Günther (1976a, 1979b) and Luhmann (1995). A purely formal notion of actors is proposed, which conceptualizes actors as producers of difference, thus connecting agency with reflexivity without binding reflexivity to a certain class of entities (e.g. human beings). In the course

of the argumentation, communication is conceptualized as a sphere of reflexivity in its own right that feeds into and is being fed by other difference-makers. Following Latour's (2005, p. 49) notion of "infra-language," the proposed approach stays empirically open to the question of what an actor may be in a given situation.

This article proceeds as follows. First of all, I will deal the notion of non-human agency as proposed by the Montreal School, theorizing actors as differences in a given situation. I will problematize this distinction using Bateson's (1972) notion of information: Every difference can only be observed as a difference that makes a difference for the observer.

This leads us to two problems: First, what is the agency of the observer? (2.1 & 2.2).

Second, how can we distinguish between actors and actions, given that both make a difference. The section concludes by arguing that the Montreal School's approach to non-human agency mainly suffers from its neglect of reflexivity – equally on the side of the research as on the side of the actor.

In the second section of the paper, I will put forward a de-ontologized concept of actors and actions based on Günther's (1976a, 1978, 1979b) and Luhmann's (1995) work. That which is regarded as having its own way of relating to the world can be regarded as an actor, while something that is regarded as an expression of reflexivity may be regarded as action. In the case of communication, I suggest that we regard human and non-human entities as the actors upon which communication is based.

## **2 Who makes the differences that makes a difference?**

The idea of non-human agency is introduced by Cooren and others using the concept of ventriloquism: "the phenomenon by which an actor makes another actor speak"

(Cooren, 2010, p. 1). At its core, this concept assumes that human actors can make non-humans talk, turning simple things into ventriloquist' dummies. These dummies can in

turn become the “real” actors, displaying agency and showing initiative; “>>Things<< (to be defined) invite themselves into our conversation and dialogues” (Cooren, 2010, p. 3).

A text written by my superior may make me do something if I start to follow the written instructions. A door built at a certain point in a wall will make me go through this door and nowhere else if I want to get to the room located beyond it.

This in turn allows humans (and non-human actors) to tele-act (Cooren, 2010, p. 28). My superior can act by appropriating my action using a note. An engineer may use a certain kind of switch to allow people to light a room easily.

So, on the one hand, humans make non-humans act; on the other hand, non human-entities gain agency by appropriation. They make human beings their dummies (Cooren, 2006). People make things do something on their behalf and things do the same with humans. Furthermore, both can tele-act by appropriating the action of other actors. Accordingly, human agents are caught in a web of non-human agents that make them speak and act in a certain way.

This idea of non-human agency not only offers a way to better understand organizational communication, but also bypasses the micro-macro problem very elegantly (Kuhn, 2012). Society is present in every interaction as it ventriloquizes the human actors, and it is, at the same time, produced in every interaction by the actors that construct actors who act on their behalf – be it single notes or leviathan-like organizations and nations that appropriate actions (Latour, 1981).

Yet, the concept as proposed by Cooren raises some questions: For example, if non-humans, such as organizations, may tele-act through humans and humans may tele-act through things, how are we to distinguish who or what acts in a given situation? If a text proposes a certain action, is it the text that acts? Is it the human who wrote the text that

tele-acts? Is it the organization for which this human works that tele-acts? Is it a new hybrid, the author-text-organization-hybrid (Latour, 1994) that acts?

Cooren's definition does not solve this problem. An actor is defined as someone or something that makes a difference in a certain situation, "whereas *agency* simply means making a difference" (Cooren, 2006, p. 82; see also Latour, 1999, 2005, p. 52). However, this definition, while staying to an astonishing degree 'flat', lets us face a new problem.

## 2.1 Differences that make a difference

The underlying problem can be understood best if we go back to Bateson's (1972) concept of information. Bateson addresses a problem in information science, drawing on Kant (1998), and defines a information as difference and a difference as "the selection of a fact" (Bateson, 1972, p. 459). But, Bateson points out this is not enough as there is an infinity of differences in every situation – no matter how small. That makes a difference practically no difference as it disappears in the infinity of all other differences. Only if a difference is selected does it become what he calls "*a difference that makes a difference*" (p. 460) - information. Accordingly, there has to be someone or something that selects. Kant solved this problem by pointing to rational human beings – which, as a matter of course – cannot be the solution in a theory that tries to abandon a notion of agency that is build on human beings. Nevertheless, the problem is a general problem of information theory and has to be dealt with if we choose a definition of agency that basically builds upon such a very flat notion of information.

However, neither Latour nor Cooren seem to be very precise in this regard. Latour, for example, points out that identifying actors is a "decision by analysts to choose among these moves [of the inquiry] the ones that they deem more reasonable" (Latour, 2005, p.

57). But as there are no criteria beyond making a difference, this definition remains insufficient. Everything that makes a difference is an actor – that, in turn, makes each situation either indescribable or makes the description arbitrary as each actor may describe the situation differently. The decision is made by the intuition of the researcher. And if we do not believe in a naïve realist way - that everyone will naturally perceive the situation in the same way and that the situation actually is as we perceive it - the analysis of the situation is no longer about the situation, but solely about the individual perception of the researcher (as human being).

The second choice seems to be to let the field choose (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 2005). This may also be consistent with seeing the mind as something distributed among things, machines, and human beings (Bateson & Bateson, 1988). But how does the field actually identify actors? Again, there seems to be two alternatives. First, we may assume language to take this role. Cooren's emphasis on "performance verbs" (Cooren, 2010, pp. 17–20) seems to hint in that direction. Latour also leans in this direction (Schiolin, 2012): Language in its use makes things act. So, from this point of view, we simply have to take language seriously and the analysis of talk will do the job of identifying which differences make differences.

But this may mean taking language far too seriously (Bloor, 1999, p. 93) as language changes very fast in its use. The same situation may be referred to differently – without there being any change in the configuration of actors. For example, if I am in France and take the train, I may take the TGV. But if I stick to the word, there are two actors: the train and the TGV, which are different actors if we take language seriously. Who brought me then, the train or the TGV? In the end, perhaps it was SNCF company or it was me, myself, who took the train. So, if we want to identify trains as actors or the SNCF as actor or regard the train-SNCF-hybrid as actor, there has to be some way of eliminating the



arbitrariness in language. Of course, there is a difference between the organization SNCF, the general reference to trains and to a specific type of trains (TGV). But this difference lies in the way we refer to a certain actors, not in the constellation of actors themselves. Calling the train a TGV does not change the train. So again, there is the act of selection of a difference that makes a difference that is carried out by someone or something.

The third choice, it appears, is human actors in the field. As the basic assumptions of human agency are not challenged, the human agent remains the unquestioned core of the theory. Although it can be appropriated by an organization, and although the human actor can be ventriloquized by a dummy, the human's ability to act remains unquestioned. The "human actor is an *obligatory passage point*" (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 229), as Cooren stresses. Latour (2005, p. 32) also seems to implicitly share this position, pointing out that we should listen to the actors in the field. This is illustrated in the overall design of the theory. It is human actors that start to build dummies, which in turn can also become agents. Accordingly, it is human beings in the field, that determine which differences make a difference.

This, however, would lead again to a situation in which human beings are again in the center of the theory. In its last consequence, it would jeopardize Cooren's definition of agency as there would not be one kind of agency, but two definitions – one of human and one of non-human agency. The first would refer to noticing differences and making differences while the latter would be passive, being noticed or making a difference for someone. This would mean that things are back to being things again. Without question, they matter. They are noticed because of their presence, their behavior, their physical properties. But in the end, they are nothing other than things that matter for a human

actor. Classical theory that regards agency as bound to human intentionality never doubted that.

Overall, Cooren's definition of non-human agency does not take reflexivity into proper account, as it does not consequently answer the question who or what determines which differences make a difference. Reflexivity as the act of perception, of noticing and pointing, basically the power of information processing, reappears at different places (the researcher, language, actors in the field) without being theorized (Bloor, 1999).

## 2.2 Difference-making Difference-makers

A flat theory of agency seems to need a concept of reflexivity, understood in the most basic sense as information process in some kind. This becomes even clearer, if we take a look at Montreal School's notion of agency which is "defined as a *transformation of state operated by an agent*" (Cooren, 2010, p. 17). While this is quite evident at first glance, the definition becomes questionable if we try to distinguish actors and actions because the transformation of a state clearly makes a difference. Moreover, it is a difference that makes a difference in a given situation. Accordingly, the definition of actor also applies to action, which means that we are not able to distinguish action from actors conceptually if we stick to the definition of actors as differences.

Theoretically speaking, we face another dimension of the problem resulting from the Kantian/Batesonian insight into the structure of information; we not only have to distinguish differences that make a difference, but differences that are made by difference-making differences. Actors are only actors because they produce differences (actions) that belong to them but that also may change. Actors may do different things but remain the same actor. They are also able to use this distinction the other way

round: They can distinguish between actors and actions. There are differences that are simply differences that make a difference (e.g. an apple falling off a tree) and as such, point to a difference-maker (e.g. my neighbor offering me an apple that has fallen off a tree or God hitting me by making the apple fall off a tree).

Actually, the idea of tele-acting (Cooren, 2010; 2006), or what Latour (1994) calls “shifting,” builds on this distinction. Acting only works because a difference that makes a difference is attributed to a difference-making difference. In this regard, tele-acting is a process that turns a once difference-making difference into a medium that transports differences made by another difference-making difference. Ventriloquism means that something that has been a simple difference becomes a difference that itself produces differences.

As we can see, this second side of the problem also points to reflexivity – only in another way. While on the one hand, we need reflexivity to distinguish something in the first place, on the other, we need reflexivity to distinguish between actions and actors. An action has to be regarded as an expression of this ‘something else’ – e.g. a god that meant to give a sign by letting the apple fall. Without this distinction of a difference that makes a difference and a difference-maker in the most general sense, there is no way to distinguish between action and agency. We would simply have a world full of actions with no one causing these actions or a world full of actors that do not act.

Accordingly, even a theory that proposes a “flat” concept of agency that does not draw on subjectivity or human intentionality does not seem to work without the dichotomy of subject and non-subject, as the difference between differences that make a difference and difference-making differences is basically the Kantian concept of subjectivity in a very reduced form: There is a real world (all imaginable differences), the world as

perceived by the subject (differences that make a difference) and the subject itself (the difference-making difference).

### **3 A de-ontologized notion of subjectivity, action and communication**

If we want to resolve the theoretical issues mentioned above, we need answers to two questions. First of all, we need a de-ontologized concept of subjectivity that will allow us to identify and distinguish between agents and actions. This concept may not be ontologically bound to human beings or anything else, as Bateson (Bateson & Bateson, 1988) points out, so that in principle, it can be applied to anything – be it human beings, gods, organizations, or things. In this regard, it has to be clearly de-ontologized. Secondly, we need a starting point for the analysis and a way of distinguishing between actors and agents. Who or what actually decides what an actor is and is not? This directly leads us to the notion of communication.

In the following section, I would like to answer both questions successively.

First, I would like to propose a de-ontologized concept of actors and agency, drawing on the works of Bateson (1979; Bateson & Bateson, 1988) Gotthard Günther (1976a, 1978, 1979a, 1979b). Günther proposes conceptualizing actors and agency as something purely formal, thus offering us a way of disconnecting subjectivity from its transcendental, and from its ontological connection.

Secondly, I would like to propose, following Luhmann (1992, 1995), a constitutive notion of communication (Craig, 1999) but that does not follow the ontological assumptions and the connection of communication Luhmann proposes. Rather, communication is regarded in the same purely formal way as actors are conceptualized:.

Communication should be understood as an information processing space that handles the incommensurability between different actors.

### 3.1 A de-ontologized notion of subjectivity, agency and action

Concealed in Cooren's proposal (2006) to regard actors as differences, there is a strategy of how to conceptualize subjectivity and agency without taking refuge in ontological ideas of human intentionality or concepts of transcendental subjectivity, as Cooren implicitly points to a highly abstract idea of information theory. It is information that Bateson conceptualizes in his talk about differences; information creation and information processes. Furthermore, Bateson (1979; Bateson & Bateson, 1988) does not connect these processes with the human being, but regards them as an organizational characteristic that can connect things, plants, humans, and animals alike. *Creatura* can be understood as realm of information. It has to be distinguished from *pleroma*, which is the realm of forces. Both connect everything in their own order and humans as much as things take part in both realms. Within *creatura*, a text makes sense. Within *pleroma*, it is simply black paint on a piece of paper with certain material properties. Unfortunately, Bateson (1979, p. 7) does not follow the idea that we deal with different realms and not classes of entities but takes refuge to the idea that *creatura* is the property of a certain class of entities.

This leaves us in need for a theory that allows us to distinguish subjectivity, that is, difference-making, *without* connecting it ex ante with a certain class of entities. In Batesons language, this would be a theory about how *creatura* differentiates itself. I would like to propose Gotthard Günther's (1976a, 1978, 1979b) ideas on

intersubjectivity as a starting point as they outline very well where the problem of such an de-ontologized idea of agency is and how it could be solved.

Traditional theories of subjectivity have a structural problem, Günther argues, as they are not able to conceptualize consistently the connection between different subjects. Strict theories of subjectivism opt for a transcendental version of subjectivity in the Cartesian tradition. The subject in this design is thought of as the foundation of any knowledge – in the last instance, as the foundation of the world - the subject is the world. This leads to the problem that any other subject is necessarily a construct within this world. Schütz (1957) pointed out this problem in the case of Husserl's (1950) transcendental inter-subjectivity. But this quasi-transcendental subject does not have to be thought of as human consciousness. In social sciences, they would rather be social constructivist views - everything is constructed by the social (Bloor, 1999; Latour, 1999). Both positions, transcendental theories of subjectivity as much as social constructivism, are structurally equivalent. In Bateson's terminology, both conceptualize one all-encompassing subject that decides which difference does make a difference. Consequently, every thought is only a difference that makes a difference – but no difference-maker, or only a derived difference-maker, constructed by the quasi-transcendental subject (Schütz, 1957).

Theories of social action have usually bypassed this problem by making subjectivity a property of entities. Yet, this only works, if we connect this property to a very limited class of entities, i.e. human beings. Neither gods nor ghosts nor things are allowed. So basically, we have would have to opt for an ontological rather than a transcendental version and connect agency with intentionality.

However, this cannot be a solution at this point as it leads to subjectivity popping up in the strangest places, as it is not bound to one class of entities; the system or the markets

begin to become subjects and Latour's (2005) despised hidden social forces are to be found everywhere. Collective action has to be explained ex-post. We start to struggle with non-human agency, for example, of animals, and try to explain the extraordinary position we ascribe to human beings (e.g. Tomasello, 2010). So instead of making agency an empirical question, we embark on building a complex ontology that fixes the status of every class of entity relating to agency and forces us to regard every kind of agency that does not fit this ontology as 'social construction'.

So the problem is basically identical in both variants. The first (transcendental and constructivist designs) regards the subject as the construction of the world and struggles with the fact that a thought in this world is but a construction. The second variant regards all subjects as things in an ontology and neglects the fact that being a subject means building ontologies, not only being part of them. Both interpretations fail to conceptualize a subject as part of other ontologies and as ontologies themselves. This, Günther (1976a) points out, is what subjectivity is all about. Every subject is part of another subject's ontology while at the same time, transcending this ontology as its own ontology may not be subsumed under the ontology of another subject.<sup>ii</sup>

Unfortunately, we are unable to conceptualize consistently this phenomenon. Either we treat a subject as a part of our ontology or as an own, living ontology, in each instance neglecting the other side. As soon as we start to think of a subject as ontology-making, every other subject only becomes a constructed thing. As soon as we think of it as something related to other subjects, this relation neglects the ontologies of the subject. Classical social theory comes to a dead end at this point.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet, there are other disciplines that have found solutions in comparable situations. Physics, Günther (1976b) observes, has confronted a similar problem in quantum physics, for example the wave-particle dualism of light: Light has to be assumed to be

wave and particle – a phenomenon, that, strictly speaking. It lacks “*Anschauung*” – a term that is hard to translate but basically means something like visualizeability (Cassin, Rendall, & Apter, 2014). We always try to think through a problem by trying to visualize it and figure out the solution – in the case of subjectivity, this visualization is either the acting human being or the evidence of Descartes’ *ego cogito*: the direct evidence of one’s own thinking. Physics was only able to cope with its new problems when it started to ignore the fact that a certain finding was not something that could consistently be visualized in our everyday understanding. Yet, this was only possible by taking refuge in other ways of thinking. Physics did that by connecting mathematical concepts with experimental data, which allows us not to care for the fact that our theory has lost its footing in *Anschauung* (Heisenberg, 1926). The formal concept is used as substitute for the evidence of “*Anschauung*”.

Accordingly, Günther (1976a) suggests regarding subjects as something like light, displaying particle and wave qualities, which quality appears depends on the observation made. Accordingly, we should conceptualize a subject as something that displays a positive and a reflexive side, something that is part of an ontology and at the same time, is constituted as producing ontologies that are not part of the first ontology.

A subject is therefore as much the foundation of the world (transcendental interpretation) as part of its own world and of other worlds.<sup>iv</sup>

This requires us to stop thinking consistently about subjectivity since from this perspective, a subject becomes something quite inconsistent and unstable. Depending on the point of reference, it is the world or it becomes part of another world; it sees itself as an entity or as the fleeting point of all entities. It is the center of all being or just an entity next to others. It cannot be located, neither as a transcendental foundation nor as a positive entity.



So what is left of the concept is something of formalism that can best be described as a kind of operand-operator dualism. A subject is an operator if it produces ontologies and it is operand when being drawn upon by other subjects. Günther (1979b) uses the term 'contexture' to mark this difference. A contexture for him is a purely formal logical area whereby it is neither difference nor difference-maker, neither entity nor ontological-producer. The subject loses its pure quality as a foundation of knowledge about the world as much as its quality as an entity within the world.

At the same time, this concept of subjects and subjectivity has the advantage of automatically implying a potentially unlimited number of other subjects (Günther, 1978, p. 118). As soon as a subject as entity is named, an ontology is implied in which this subject is included. Observing a subject as such implies automatically another observing position, another subjectivity. At the same time, the reference also implies the limits of its own ontology. By observing a subject as subject, the subject as reflexive subject is implied – which necessarily transcends the limits of the observation. Actually, Günther's (1976a, pp. 277–280) idea of de-ontologized subjectivity leads to concept contextures actively relating to each other. As no contexture is closed within itself, as a transcendental subject is, it offers an unlimited number of ontologies to draw upon. But only the object-side of a contexture can be drawn upon as part of another ontology. This leads to ever-new irritation and movement because the ontological side is never consumed by another contexture, thus offering ever-new irritation as it is intermingled with the object side. And, as the formal notion of subjectivity is neither connected to transcendental nor to ontological assumptions, a subject can be anything – gods, demons, organizations, or formal procedures.

This notion of subjectivity also offers us a starting point for distinguishing between actors and actions, as contextures can be drawn upon differently by other contextures.

As it is always the object-side that is accessible, they are first a difference that makes a difference, to quote Bateson, an entity. Yet, they become a subject as soon as the ontological side starts to shine through; as soon as this object-side is connected with the idea of an ontological side. This connection can be made in two different ways (Günther, 1979a). The first would be to regard an object as a manifestation, as an expression of an inaccessible ontology-maker. This would mean understanding the object via its ontological side: A given difference would appear to be an expression of will. It would be an action. This would, for example, apply to the arrow Castor and Cooren (2006) mention, entries in calendars, and other texts: They are expressions of a 'thou,' maybe even of a former me that reminds me in the present. In any case, they do not exhibit reflexivity themselves.

The other way of relating to an entity as subject would be to not regard it as the expression of an ontology, but rather as a signifier for ontology-making. This would be to draw upon another contexture as cognition: The other would appear to be an actor, proposing an ontology. Reflexivity is understood via objectivity.

It may be important to note a third way of understanding an entity: It may very well be only part of one ontology without referring to another. A difference that makes a difference in this regard is neither actor nor action, but only a thing.

In these differences, it is important to note that the difference between objectivity and reflexivity is to be understood purely as formal one. It does not refer to a world out there, to a social construct, or to a transcendental subject. In this regard, it is not only ontologically indifferent to reflexivity; it makes no ontological statement about what has to be understood as reflexivity and what not. But at the same time, it also makes no statement about objectivity. Objectivity does not refer to materiality or any other form of "manifest reality." Objectivity only refers to what works as an object-side in the

formal calculus – be it bodily presence, sound waves, the innards of sacrificial animals, texts, or the feeling of a divine presence. An abstract notion of objectivity makes no statement about what is understood to be an entity or what is not. Günther's formal solution, therefore, has a status similar to calculus in quantum physics – it offers a formal solution without regard for "Anschauung" or the "real world," which makes it de-ontologized.

### 3.2 Communication as an order of its own

Günther's proposal has thus offered us a notion of subjectivity that disconnects the idea from transcendental assumptions and also from attributions to humans. Furthermore, it allows us to distinguish between actors and actions in a similar, de-ontologized way. So the first question raised has been answered. There remains the second question: Who or what actually decides who or what may be regarded as an actor?

As must become clear from what has been said thus far, there may be a different picture depending on which contexture we take as the starting point. As each contexture produces its own ontology, each has a different notion of who or what to regard as an actor. Even a relation between two human beings may be subject to such a difference; for example, a galley slave trying to grasp his master's every hint, while the master regards the slave as a trivial thing that only happens to display something of its own ontology when it breaks down. Yet even in this case, it may simply be physical breakdown. In any case, a de-ontologized notion of actors and agency confronts us with the necessity of letting a certain ontology "snap in." We have to choose a starting point – not as an absolute one, but as a Heisenberg Cut. This point of departure does not rule out others, but it marks our position as observers, and shows from which position certain differences make a difference.

As this paper is about communication theory, I would suggest regarding the communication itself as the relevant contexture. Drawing from Luhmann (1992, 1995), I would like to argue that communication itself may very well be regarded not as a relation between actors, but as a contexture in itself that constitutes agents and agency. Even in “those scenes beloved of interactionists where a few people, most often just two, are interacting in cloistered spots hidden from the view of others” (Latour, 1996, p. 231), actors and agency can be regarded as a result of communication unfolding itself. Communication is thus not conceptualized as transmission or as something done by actors. Rather, it is thought to be an order on its own which relates other orders. Luhmann (1992) argues that communication is nothing that is done by humans, but something that is between them (Schoeneborn, 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2014). He defines communication as the unity of information, utterance, and understanding: Alter decides to tell Ego information and chooses a way to express him- or herself. This results in what is usually called ‘communicative behavior’ or a ‘communicative act.’ Yet, Luhmann points out that unless this information is understood in a certain way, the utterance remains nothing but physical behavior: Somebody does something that stays meaningless, like an apple falling off a tree. The ‘someone’ stays a ‘somewhat;’ a difference that does not make a difference. Therefore, Luhmann argues, communication starts as soon as Ego understands that there is someone (Alter) that somehow has a way of relating to the world and that this someone tries to say (write, yell, tell) something. This something is understood in regard to its content (information) and form (utterance).

First of all, the understanding, the completion of the communication, fits the original information and intention of the speaker into the world of the recipient, thus finishing the communication. Yet, and this is crucial for Luhmann, the understanding is not simply

a passive form of reception. Rather, it is an active process that makes sense of what is first some indifferent physical sound/movement/sign. The understanding is, therefore, even if sometimes only to a small degree, a creative process in itself, by making sense of what has been said, producing a meaning that is different – if only slightly - than what has actually been said. So, understanding always adds something to the communication. It is also crucial to note that understanding in communication is not identical to what the single human being thinks. Ego and Alter may each have their own opinions while acting according to the rules of politeness or without understanding what triggered the dynamic that has evolved. Communication, Luhmann concludes, is therefore something that cannot be attributed to one side – neither with regard to action nor to understanding. It is not the behavior of Alter nor what Ego thinks of this behavior. Communication is in between, producing a dynamic that cannot be traced back to the ideas and intentions of the individual human beings.

Action, in this concept of communication, is communication making sense of itself. The understanding, as the third element of a single, communicative act, attributes the utterance and the information to one side, neglecting its own contribution in concluding the communication. The understanding does not realize its own contribution on the side of Ego and attributes the whole communication to Alter, producing an asymmetry that helps keep the communication alive as both sides know when and who contributed what (or at least think so, consequently forgetting the necessary understanding).

Communication basically thinks that what has been understood is actually what has been said – a basic form in which communication does not understand itself in order to keep itself alive.

In the course of the ongoing communication, every communicative element (defined as the unity of information, utterance, and understanding) attributes itself to one

communicative address and thus constantly ascribes agency. In the course of this ongoing process of attributing agency, it is the communication that produces what can be understood as an actor. The intended meaning and the physical behavior on the side of Ego and Alter do not make them actors. Rather, it is the fact that their behavior is understood in a certain way and attributed to them as intentional behavior. Whether Ego and Alter meant to say what the communication understood and attributed to them does not matter in this regard. It is the attribution that counts. And every attempt to clarify that a certain laugh was rather unintentional and not meant as disrespect still depends on being understood and attributed in the right way; this attribution is not accomplished by the actors but by the communicative process. This is what Luhmann means when he states that “*only communication can communicate* and that only within such a network of communication is what we understand as action created” (Luhmann, 1992, p. 251).

While we do not necessarily have to share the multiple ontological assumptions, the built-in ontology of psychic systems and the exclusion of any materiality (Baraldi, 1993; Schoeneborn, 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2014) that Luhmann’s theory implies – actually, the proposed approach would not be fully compatible with a Luhmannian perspective on agency (Blaschke, 2015) –, his notion of communication resolves our second problem; assuming that communication produces its own ontology that differs from that of any other contexture involved. Only in this reduced way it is suggested as a point of departure (Jansen, 2014). We may observe which other contextures communication draws upon, which entities are referred to as being actions and which are referred to as being actors and – this is important to note – which entities are simply things, not connected to any other ontology but only a part of the ontology that the communication itself produces. In a certain way, communication may be thought as something like

Bateson's creatura (Bateson & Bateson, 1988), a pattern of information-processing that connects.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

In the following, I would like to discuss the consequences of the proposed theory first for the Montreal School and then for the wider context of communication theory.

### 4. Implications for the Montreal School

The notion of agency and actors as proposed by the Montreal School implies a very high, theoretically almost an unlimited number of actors in a given situation. Castor and Cooren (2006) name for example arrows or single documents – everything, that makes a difference. From the proposed perspective, the number of actors would be very much smaller. For example, an arrow will not be regarded as an actor (Castor & Cooren, 2006) but rather as the action of an organization. At the same time, the identification of actors becomes more precise. For example, if a certain sheet is used for doing a medical test, it would not be regarded as an actor (Bencherki, 2015), as it is the test that proves a certain ontology in a certain situation, not the sheet. The critical question would not be, "Does it make a difference?", but, "Is it a difference-maker within a certain communicative setting?" "Does it propose its own ontology – even if only a very limited and trivial one?" The test, objectified in a sheet, would propose an ontology. The sheet of paper itself would not.

Besides this, a polycontextural perspective must begin working with indices and with interlinking subjects as each positive actor identified necessarily raises the question of the ontology of this new actor and the ontology of this new actor will lead to other actors

and their ontologies. The agency can only be identified using an index that states whose agency works for whom. Thus, the oscillation/vacillation Cooren (2012) notes does not disappear. But we may give an index to it, an address, thus fixing the oscillation/vacillation within a certain relation. The phenomenon can then be understood as the very incoherence of different contextures: While within one, a certain object may be an actor, within the other, it may only be action or simply an object.

#### 4.2 In the further context of communication theory

Putting the proposed approach into the frame and relating it to other communication theories cannot be done easily by identifying it with one of the traditions Craig (1999) names, especially as Craig's reception of the cybernetic tradition does not reflect on second-order cybernetics and therefore does not fully apply to Luhmann (Craig, 2015). Furthermore, Cooren's (2012) reconstruction of his own theorizing does not fit the meta-model either (Craig, 2015). However, Craig's meta-model may offer a good point of reference to relate the proposed approach in its main properties to communication theory as a whole.

Regarding the theoretical tradition, the proposed theory draws from cybernetics and from idealism, from which the phenomenological tradition emerged. While this, at first glance, may seem to be a strange marriage, the basic figure such as self-reference, operational closure, the focus on information processing/thinking, and an inclination to constructivist/transcendental epistemological positions point to common roots (Baecker, 2013). In this regard, a poly-contextuality notion of communication builds upon the same theoretical roots in both traditions.



Therefore, it is no wonder that communication is conceptualized in a cybernetic understanding rather than as something that in some way “is,” such as manifest expressions or signs, but as information processes. Communication is therefore understood in close structural analogy to human consciousness as Husserl regards it. In this regard, it resembles Luhmann’s (1992) theoretical design.

Also close to Luhmann, but also to a phenomenological tradition– or in certain regards to a pragmatist (Craig, 2007) or semiotic tradition (Kastner, 2001) – communication is regarded as being the answer to the tension between different ontologies. However, the proposed perspective does not identify these different ontologies with psychic systems (Luhmann) or human subjectivity (phenomenology), but gives it a more radical twist towards information theory. Information processors are not regarded as entities within the world, but also conceptualized from a purely information-theoretical point of view. An information processor is what information identifies as an information processor. However, this is not to be understood in a radical constructivist way, assuming that actors are but mere communicative constructions. Rather, I would follow Bateson (Bateson & Bateson, 1988) who regard information as a specific order of the world. Different contextures would be the internal differentiation of Bateson’s *creatura*.

In this regard, it becomes difficult to say whether the proposed approach is a constitutive theory of communication. In a certain way, it certainly is, as it assumes communication to be understood as a powerful reflexive sphere on its own. On the other hand, however, the primer of the theory does not lie in communication. Rather, it is a wider theoretical design that theorizes the differentiation of information processing. This also includes consciousness. In this regard, the presented interpretation of Günther is closer to Hegel (1977) whose theory is a constitutive theory of the spirit: The

distinction between individual and absolute spirit is secondary. This means that the interconnectedness is always there.

This also has implications for the traditional distinction between “transmission” or “constitutive” notions of communication (Craig, 1999). There is neither a pure “transmission” nor is there a pure “communicative construction.” There is no transmission because the information within one contexture is never the same as within the next. But in the same regard, there is no pure “construction” because information is regarded as occurring before communication and contexture and are conceptualized as always, already connected.

#### 4.3 Implications for empirical research

These theoretical design specs would also guide empirical research. The interest would rest on the question of how contextures feed and are fed in a certain communicative setting and how they interlink. Communication derives its order from relating different contextures in a way that displays dynamic instability. It can only be understood as always polyvalent, connecting different meanings. Thus, communication can only be understood relationally, drawing from incoherencies (e.g. Castor & Cooren, 2006; Cooren et al., 2013).

The relation of the different contextures would furthermore neither be conceptualized, in the way of right or wrong transmission, nor would the “communicative construction” be of first interest. Rather, the question would be how different ontologies draw on each other by understanding or misunderstanding (Jansen, 2016). Are there certain elements (e.g. rhetorical figures, semantics, concepts) that can be regarded as boundary objects

(Star & Griesemer, 1989) between different sides? Are there systematic misunderstandings that produce a specific order?

For example, if applied to the field of political communication, such a perspective would not very well link up with perspectives that define communication as messages bound to a certain intention (Denton & Woodward, 1998; McNair, 2011) or as “construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics” (Graber & Smith, 2005, p. 479). The interesting questions would not be so much whether a message is presented in the right way or through which media it is transferred (e.g. Holbrook, 2002; Vraga, Carr, Nytes, & Shah, 2010). Broadly speaking, the proposed approach would not align with either of the main theories in political communication (Blumler, 2015), as neither question of media effects in categories are more or less persuasive, nor the question of whether journalists or politicians “lead in this tango” (Blumler, 2015, p. 429) or whether a voice is secured, would be asked from the proposed approach.

The proposed approach would rather ask which political actors show up in certain contexts and how these actors interlink (Jansen, Schlippe, & Vogd, 2015). And this interlinkage can be based on understanding as well as on misunderstanding. In this regard, research in political communication would be much closer to Mannheim’s (1984) studies on conservatism or Lakoff’s (2006) work on liberalism and conservatism, or theories of different journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch, 2007). The interesting question would always be how the ontologies of different actors connect. Mannheim, for example, explains why conservatives and liberals in the Weimar Republic are in constant conflict, although their positions do not seem to differ very much. He explains this by a systematic misunderstanding rooted in different world-views (tradition and irrationality vs. future and rationalism) that are seldom articulated but account for a

permanent conflict. This conflict is, however, quite stable and produces clear communication patterns between both sides. Thus, the contribution of this very abstract approach lies in the instruments it offers to reconstruct the relation of different reflexive positions into what Bateson (1979, p. 8) calls the 'pattern which connects.'

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<sup>ii</sup> The Montreal Schools notion of agency can in this regard be interpreted as an attempt to solve the same problem by completely avoiding reflexivity at all.

<sup>iii</sup> It should become clear that the concept of ontology that is being used here is much more fundamental than what studies in the „ontological turn“ regard as ontology (Aspers, 2014). Ontology is not something that is produced by actors, but reflexivity in its very basic form that precedes any notion of human beings doing things, of actors, and even of logic.

<sup>iv</sup> Again, there is a nice distinction in German: „Leib“ as the being a body and „Körper“ as having a body or being a body observed by someone else (Cassin, Rendall, & Apter, 2014).