

**THE PARTICIPATION THEORY OF COMMUNICATION: PHILOSOPHICAL AND
METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERLINGUA PERSPECTIVES¹**

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Abstract

The Participation Theory of Communication provides a conceptual framework for describing and analyzing communicative phenomena. The theory is argued to be a *lingua franca* that allows for translating the results of the various programs in the diverse field of communications research, while the framework is also presented as one that is capable of accounting for the various phenomena that are considered communicative in nature. The Participation Theory of Communication is explicated by describing and analyzing the fundamental constituents of the conceptual framework presented, such as agent, problem solving, abilities and participation, while the discussion also reflects on the nature of interdisciplinarity, and the role of an interlingua in interdisciplinary research programs.

1. The state of the art: communication research and the Participation Theory of Communication

From the point of view of the goals and the motivations of the Participation Theory of Communication², at least two trends can be noticed in the recent history of communication research. On the one hand, many independent projects conceive their subject (or subjects) under the general heading of communication. These investigations are independent to the extent that the conceptual frameworks, aims and methodologies of these distinct schools or research projects show significant or at least seemingly significant differences. On the other hand, social sciences and humanities in the past few decades have become increasingly and irreversibly interdisciplinary, and questions that traditionally belonged to communication research often turned out to be of utmost importance in a number of other fields in the social sciences and humanities. For instance, traditional ethnography mostly described artefacts, traditions, social events, rituals and the like, but anthropology today primarily concentrates on studying the communicative character of social phenomena.³ Similarly, traditional ethical views have been challenged by *dialogical* ethical systems, which originate their principles from the notion of *mutual consent* in order to establish their validity. Dialogical ethical accounts are philosophical

² See Section 2 for a detailed explication of the Participation Theory of Communication.

³ Cf., for instance, Geertz, 1973.

in terms of their foundations and methodologies, but they obtain their principles from reflections on communication.⁴

Furthermore, a number of fields and questions that traditionally belonged to other disciplines have also turned out to be of interest and importance in communication research in the sense that examining and analyzing them from a communicative perspective have often proven to be relevant and adequate. In communication research, phenomena that were previously not studied as communicative are also recognized now as communicative in nature. For instance, traditional theories of social structure were often based exclusively on property relations, while today social macrostructure is also studied as a system of communicative structures (Habermas, 1981).⁵ Hence, communication research has become on a par with sociology, anthropology, political science, etc. in describing and analyzing social macrostructure.

Questions and problems in the literature also arise from a fact of the history of research in communication; instead of relying on (or rather, in the absence of) a comprehensive and integrated conceptual and methodological framework, various scientific sources, coming from different disciplines, such as mathematics, biology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, etc. have been utilized when trying to provide adequate models of the variety of

⁴ Cf. Bormann, 1980; Fromm, 1956; Hart, 1972; Jourard, 1967; Lévinas, 1971; Povell, 1969; Rogers, 1961. The various dialogical accounts have different theoretical roots in Buber, 1922; Mead, 1934; Rosenzweig, 1925.

⁵ Similar trends can be observed in the development of logic, where progress is often made by uncovering previously unrecognized logical characteristics, which are open to formal analysis. (Cf. Ryle, 1954.)

communicative phenomena.⁶ The result of these trends is that an enormous amount of knowledge has been accumulated about communicative phenomena, this knowledge even allows us to make sufficiently accurate predictions in some cases, nevertheless, our overall knowledge is highly fragmented, and it contains theories and results that can hardly be understood in terms of one another. The accumulated knowledge is encyclopedic in nature, and we can hardly see the beginnings of a successful integrative framework. There are, for instance, transactional and interactional models on the market today. Some phenomena can be successfully accounted for by a transactional model, while others cannot be explained by it. Encyclopedic accumulation here means that the transactional model will account for *what fits the model*, without explaining all the phenomena there are to be explained (much of which would not fit a single model), and without integrating them into a unified framework. These problems can be easily seen and studied by consulting a few standard collections and reviews of the literature.⁷

‘Participation’ refers to the process in which individuals or groups get together in order to communicate with each other, to interact with each other, to inform others and to be informed by others, to accumulate some knowledge, to make decisions and to solve problems together. The act of taking part in some activity, for which the identifying concept of the Participation Theory of Communication stands, is often referred to as a relatively recent conception of democracy in

⁶ Cf. Beckenbach & Tompkins, 1971.

⁷ See the following works, for instance: Gerbner & alii, 1989; Johnston, 2003; Griffin, 2000; Infante, Rancer & Womack, 1997; Schiller, 1996.

proposals for organizing, or more precisely, developing democracy based on participation⁸, and these proposals may be regarded as suggestions for a specific strategy for developing society.⁹ Moreover, in the same context (of developing society) we can also read about participatory communication in the title of specific projects.¹⁰ In these projects, the task of developing or extending democracy is presented as a communicative problem, and the projects themselves often hope to achieve their goals primarily by developing communication. Communication, however, is closely related to participation in another sense as well. Any communicative event involves the participation of communicators, and their participation is based on a shared body of knowledge. The Participation Theory of Communication offers a systematic theoretical elaboration of this insight.

The Participation Theory of Communication has been developed in Horányi, 1999, 2001, 2002 in order to address and resolve a number of open questions and difficulties in communication research. Some of these questions originate in the nature of communicative phenomena themselves, and this nature can be briefly summarized as follows. Communication is not a kind of phenomenon that can be identified by a single *essentia*; rather, it is a set of various phenomena, which are rooted in the same need of agents. For instance, dialogues and inter-organizational communication are instances of communication in different senses; so are media

⁸ For the different conceptions of participatory democracy see Chekki, 1979, xiii; Arnstein, 1969, 216-224; Webler & Tuler, 2001, 29-30; Rosenbaum, 1978, 43-54, for instance.

⁹ Cf. Beierle, 2002; Crotty, 1991; Lucas, 1976; Rosenstone, 1993; Rueschemeyer, 1998.

¹⁰ Cf. Bessette, 1996; Depoe, 2004; Gastil, 1993; Servaes, 1996.

communication and cross-cultural communication, and so forth. These phenomena may – and as we will suggest in this paper do – not have a set of characteristics in common, that is, the phenomenon of communication may not be defined essentially. We will argue, however, that the various forms of phenomena described as communication or communicative can be all characterized as being rooted in the need of agents to recognize and/or solve problems.

We suggest that the Participation Theory of Communication can provide an integrated conceptual meta-framework or interlingua for clarifying, assessing and reorganizing the aforementioned distinct but related phenomena. The Participation Theory of Communication is a model itself, i.e., it proposes a model that allows us to describe and analyze *the variety of communicative phenomena*, and as such, it may be understood as one of the competing theories on the market today. However, we propose that the primary theoretical and methodological virtue of the Participation Theory is not merely that it enriches the available theoretical tools in the field, but that different models can be understood, described and assessed in its terms. We will refer to such a system as interlingua or *lingua franca*. The advantage and use of such an interlingua is twofold. First, it can provide the necessary conceptual framework for understanding, comparing and resolving real and apparent theoretical differences and disagreements between current theories of communication in terms of their explanatory capabilities, possible weaknesses, and the like. Second, from an epistemological point of view, it is also useful to present and discuss the mutual connections among the social sciences and humanities with respect to analyzing communicative phenomena in such terms (in such theoretical “language”) that do not prevent – by their very nature, i.e., by their conceptual and terminological limitations – the exploration of these connections. (This is especially important if

we consider the aforementioned trends in the social sciences and humanities, i.e., that a number of phenomena that were not considered communicative, are now studied as ones that are communicative in nature.) The social sciences and humanities as well as different branches or schools of communication research all lack such an interlingua at the moment. Moreover, even the need for such an interlingua is often unrecognized. The Participation Theory of Communication is offered as an adequate and theoretically prepared model, which is formulated in a conceptual and terminological framework that is suitable for these needs and purposes; it is an interlingua for clarifying, assessing and reorganizing the kaleidoscopic and varicolored world of communication research.

2. Précis of the Participation Theory of Communication: agent, problem solving, abilities and participation

The Participation Theory of Communication originates in the recognition that in spite of many possible functions of communicative acts, communication (that is, any instance of the phenomenon of communication) is to be understood as an often necessary and sometimes sufficient condition of problem solving. That is, communication is an often necessary and sometimes sufficient *constituent* of recognizing and/or solving problems. Humans and nonhuman creatures alike continuously face problems (in many cases social conflicts), and it is their basic interest to solve these problems in order to maintain (or increase) their comfort, or quite often merely in order to survive. In other words, the Participation Theory conceives communication as a constituent (or often as an instance) of recognizing and/or solving problems.

Of course, neither recognizing nor solving problems could happen without the problem recognizing and/or problem solving agent's specific *ability* to recognize and/or solve problems. That is, identifying a problem includes identifying an agent, for whom the problem in question is, indeed a problem, and who needs to possess certain abilities to recognize and/or solve it. There are two sources of such abilities. On the one hand, agents may possess abilities without having to acquire them, that is, agents may originally possess the ability to recognize and/or solve the problem in question. Reflexes (e.g. pupillary reflex) are examples of this kind of *non-acquired* ability. On the other hand, agents may also *acquire* the ability to solve a given problem. This acquisition is learning during socialization (as in the case of learning how to count¹¹). In the appropriate situations our pupil prevents too much light from reaching our retina before it would suffer any harm, and by doing some basic calculations we can make sure that the land we are about to buy is, indeed of the size claimed by the seller. It goes without saying that the kinds of non-acquired abilities an agent possesses and the kinds of abilities it is capable of acquiring are characteristic of a given (kind of) agent. It is also apparent that agents possessing more (in number) and more complex abilities to recognize and solve problems than others (and hence,

¹¹ It was widely assumed for some time that mathematical abilities are acquired ones, and that the acquisition of such abilities requires language use. Recent experiments with animals and pre-verbal children, however, suggest that at least some number concepts (numerical quantities up to number three or four) and some basic arithmetic abilities (addition and subtraction) may be innate. (For an overview of recent experiments and discussions in cognitive psychology and cognitive ethology see Carey, 2001; Dehaene, 2001; Wynn, 1998, for instance.) Of course, the interpretation of the results of these experiments is itself the subject of debates. These developments, however, do not affect what is argued in this paper. Even if some basic mathematical abilities turn out to be non-acquired, most of what is taught in math classes at schools would still belong to the category of acquired abilities.

being more likely to have the appropriate ability at hand when needed) will be more successful in doing so in the appropriate situations, and in turn, these agents will also be more successful in adaptation than their less prepared competitors. Furthermore, it follows from what has been said so far that in the Participation Theory not only communication is discussed in the context of problem solving, but problem and problem solving are also understood in a broader framework of maintaining or increasing one's comfort and/or in terms of one's survival.

According to the Participation Theory, (acquired and non-acquired) abilities are to be conceived as *states* of the agent in the context of recognizing and/or solving problems. Abilities are not processes or events; the *effective presence* of a given ability is a state of the agent, which state may be the result of earlier processes or events, and from which, of course, successful events or processes of problem recognition and/or solution may follow. An ability that makes recognizing and/or solving a given problem possible is logically *a priori* in the situation of recognizing and/or solving the problem. That is, the ability necessary for recognizing and/or solving a problem must already be *present in* the agent in such a way that makes recognizing and/or solving the problem possible. Acquired abilities (i.e., abilities beyond what an agent possesses without learning) are obtained communicatively. That is, acquired abilities are obtained via (or as a result of) communication.

The abilities necessary for successfully recognizing and/or solving problems will be discussed here from the point of view of the distinction between the *acquired* and the *non-acquired*. These abilities are very diverse in nature; they include knowing what, knowing how, even knowing which one (and these are subserved by various cognitive mechanisms, which – on a different

level of description – may also be described as abilities), beliefs, emotions, and so on. The abilities (together with their specific arrangement) constitute the agent's own-world.¹²

Most theoretical approaches or specific models conceive communication as a sort of process or event, although there are positions, such as G. Gerbner's cultivation model¹³, which diverge from the mainstream in this respect. The Participation Theory recognizes and accepts that *changes* in communicative states are to be characterized as processes or events (e.g. to be given a piece of advice, to recognize an encouraging wink, to become frightened while watching a thriller, etc.). However, by introducing the concept of the communicative, the theory enriches the conceptual tools for describing communicative phenomena and (for the aforementioned reasons) the theory characterizes the communicative *as a state* in all cases when the state in question is an acquired ability. Let us elaborate this point a bit further.

An agent is in a communicative state when it possesses an acquired ability that can be utilized in recognizing and/or solving problems. This ability originates in *participating* in the accumulated stock of abilities of a community. Mutual comprehension is ineliminable in communication, because it is necessary for obtaining abilities to recognize and/or solve problems. This

¹² The agent's own-world is also dynamic; it accumulates, processes and produces abilities (in the broad sense characterized in this paper). The source of dynamism may be internal (e.g. processing, reorganizing abilities) and external (e.g. socialization). The concept of own-world has its roots in the concept of *Lebenswelt* (or life-world), which appeared in Husserl's phenomenology and which was introduced in the social sciences by Alfred Schütz. (Cf. Husserl, 1976; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973.)

¹³ E.g. Gerbner, 1969; Signorielly & Morgan, 1990.

participation provides the theoretical framework that makes the role of mutual comprehension explicit. The stock of acquired abilities an agent possesses may be more or less than that of the community¹⁴, and the state may also change; the agent's participation in the stock of abilities of the community may increase, the agent may not participate in changes in the abilities of the community, and the like. That is, both "communicative state" and "communicative process" (or "communicative event") are legitimate terms in the Participation Theory, but (due to the necessarily *a priori* character of the ability in the situation of recognizing and/or solving the problem) "communicative state" is the adequate term in the case of describing the ability of an agent to recognize and/or solve problems.

This conception of abilities has a number of consequences. For instance, the *presence* of abilities becomes available for discussion and investigation. The specific event in which problem recognition and/or solution occurs determines the available time frame in which the agent must successfully carry out the task of recognizing and/or solving the problem at hand. The available time frame, in turn, determines what forms of availability (of the necessary abilities) will belong to the stock of *present* (or actual) abilities. When crossing the street in a big traffic, we do not

¹⁴ For instance, the community may limit (intentionally or unintentionally) the stock of actually available abilities for the agent by denying certain aspects or areas of socialization from the agent (cf. Bernstein, 1971 for classical, although in several respects controversial studies on the question). On the other hand, the communicative character of the community is not the sole factor in determining the stock of acquired abilities of the agent. The agent may also *choose* to participate in some of the available opportunities for learning. (The agent may decide to study English but not German, may decide to become an engineer, not a teacher, and the like.) Finally, agents may also possess abilities obtained in communities other than the current or currently relevant community (or communities) of the agent.

have the time to (consciously) calculate¹⁵, not even in our head, whether or not we would make it to the other side at our usual speed. The problem is even less suited for using external devices for taking measurements, and then for using a pocket calculator for determining if the circumstances are suitable for crossing the street at the very moment. Computing and constructing the trajectories of satellites, however, does allow for complex and complicated calculations in order to avoid the collision of the satellites. When taking an exam, we need to know the date of the fall of the Bastille by heart. Knowing some data by heart is considered to be a specific way of accessing the data (the date of the fall of the Bastille in this case); this is the ability necessary to solve the problem in an exam situation. However, in most other cases it is sufficient to know where we can find the book (on our shelf, in a public library, etc.), in which we can find the specific date in question. The kind of access characterized by expressions, such as *it is in my head* or *knowing by heart* is a case when the needed ability is *actually present* and available to the agent, although the experience described as *I know, but I cannot recall it right now* may need

¹⁵ Of course, in this example we rely on the distinction between conscious calculations and cognitive computational processes that are not available to our consciousness. That is, we accept that on the level of cognitive computational processes the ability utilized here may be described as an ability to “calculate”. This is, however, clearly a different ability (on a different cognitive level) from the ability of consciously doing mathematical calculations. We may well be able to cross the street in a big traffic (utilizing the necessary computational abilities underlying the ability of correctly estimating the circumstances) without being able to do any of the mathematical calculations that would demonstrate our necessary speed and trajectory in order to avoid being hit by any of the approaching vehicles. This is similar to a number of our other abilities. For instance, the ability to stay in balance may be (and presumably is) based on computational processes that are not available to consciousness, and most of us would be in serious trouble if this ability required being able to do the corresponding mathematical calculations for balancing our body.

further discussion and elaboration from the point of view of actual availability. This actual type of availability can be contrasted with a different, non-actual kind of availability. When I say that the needed information is *available in the book on my shelf*, I report that the necessary ability to solve the problem at hand is not actually present, but it is (potentially) *accessible*. In this case, the available time frame for recognizing and/or solving the problem is of utmost importance from the point of view of success.

Another consequence of the conception of communication introduced above that we should briefly discuss here is the *location* of the abilities we acquire through socialization. If acquired abilities can be understood as ones that became available to an agent earlier, and therefore as ones possessed by the agent now, then we are warranted to ask where these abilities are when they are utilized during problem recognition and/or problem solving, and also where these abilities were before they became available to the agent. A further question is closely related to the aforementioned ones. The ability called “counting in one’s head” became available not only to me in elementary school, but also to most (where ‘most’ can be further specified) of my classmates, and hence, this ability (people’s ability to count in their head) can be considered to be the same in most practical situations. This phenomenon calls for an explanation, since the specific case of possessing an ability (such as counting in one’s head) is possessing something in a very different sense than possessing (owning) a house. Another person may possess a house, which is *identical in appearance to my house*, nevertheless, not identical with it. However, the same distinction cannot be drawn about possessing abilities, such as counting in one’s head. In other words, objects that I possess are exclusively mine, but abilities are mine in a different sense of the word. A former classmate of mine may very well be somewhat faster when counting in her

head, nevertheless this difference becomes both practically and theoretically insignificant and irrelevant, if we are both successful in recognizing and/or solving problems, during which we utilize this ability.¹⁶

According to the Participation Theory of Communication, these acquired abilities constitute the *communicative* which (or part of which) is available to an agent or, in other words, in which an agent participates some way or another in a given instance of recognizing and/or solving a problem. The communicative is where we can reach for acquired abilities. Reaching for such abilities have various (and in many respects significantly different) ways; we can ask questions from others, we can consult a theatre guide, we can use a search engine on the Internet, and so on. We must realize, however, that the differences between these ways of reaching for the communicative are not functional in nature, but merely technological. If our suggestion that acquired abilities are states in recognizing and/or solving problems is acceptable, then it also becomes clear and understandable that the Participation Theory of Communication maintains that the function of communication is the participation of agents in the communicative.

¹⁶ Sperber, 1996 claims that possessing these abilities (mental representations) is similar to possessing objects in the sense that acquiring a piece of knowledge (that is, forming a mental representation) is not an identical replication of another (mental or public) representation. This proposal, however, would require an exact, systematic, and theoretically relevant specification of the ways the same ability may differ when possessed by different individuals, and the account should also be extended to cases when the ability cannot be explicated in terms of (mental) representation, but in terms of a cognitive mechanism, for instance.

In the terminology of the Participation Theory, the term “communicative” is broader in scope than that of “communication”; not all communicative phenomena are instances of communication, but all instances of communication are communicative. For instance, we usually do not intend to communicate anything with the way we position ourselves in space when talking to others. Nevertheless, our spatial relations are communicative, and disregarding such relations (e.g. staying closer to someone than it is “permitted” in a given culture) results in a number of (often unwanted) consequences.

According to the Participation Theory of Communication, a phenomenon is communicative in nature if a problem solving agent (having acquired abilities) can be ascribed to the phenomenon in question. The communicative is a set of acquired abilities that an agent may possess. These abilities provide the basis for problem solving, which is the fundamental characteristic of agents in this framework. Problems, trying to solve problems and the ability to solve problems play a central role in the theory. This orientation of agents (the need and inclination to recognize and solve problems) is the driving force behind obtaining various kinds of abilities that make *successful adaptation* possible (where adaptation is understood in terms of surviving and/or improving one’s quality of life).

Finally, we should also discuss here the consequences of the proposed conception of communication regarding agents. The conceptual space (or “ontology”) of the theory allows not only for individual human agents (we usually think of such agents when communication is considered without much reflection), but also for non-individual agents. That is, the conceptual space of the theory allows for agency “below” and “above” the individual. The former kind of

non-individual agency is not discussed here in any detail, while the latter kind will be explicated as *collective* agency.

Agents may possess different kinds of abilities, of which some are non-acquired and some are acquired. The latter originates in participating in the communicative. What is usually called communication in traditional models and in everyday speech (that is, when the emphasis is on conveying or exchanging information) is, in fact, a function of agents. Agents can fulfill this function because they are in a certain specific state, which state can be described as *participating* in the communicative. Communication is also the origin of participating in the communicative and of the changes in the states of the agents. The integration of agents into communities is the result of the communicative. In other words, shared abilities (including both acquired and non-acquired abilities) make communication possible, and the lack of shared abilities may prevent communication. Agents obtain the necessary acquired abilities via communication. This process is prompted (and to a certain degree guided) by non-acquired abilities (which are often called “innate”) that are available to the agent without communication.

Collective agents may be constituted of individual agents as well as other collective agents. Collective agents exhibit the same kind of unity as individual agents do to the extent that they need to recognize and solve problems just as individual agents need to do so. For instance, families, companies, etc. can be construed as collective agents. (Our family handles things this or that way, as opposed to *that* family, as opposed to *them*. Management organization is such and such, business activity is this and that in our company, as opposed to *that other* company, moreover, our carefully maintained image is also different from *theirs*.) There are numerous

types of collective agents, and in this paper we cannot attempt to provide a typology of them, therefore we will settle with a few examples, which introduce the very notion of collective agency.

The unity or integration of a collective agent depends on the integration of its constituent agents; collective agents may be more or less integrated. Similarly to individual agents, the behavior of collective agents may be congruent or incongruent, and the behavior of one collective agent may be more congruent than the behavior of another (with which it is very difficult to do business, because it often behaves incongruently).

The background of both integration and congruency is described in the Participation Theory as the agent's own-world. The own-world of a given agent consists of memories of past events (and their documentation), various pieces of attitudes, such as knowledge, beliefs, emotions, ambitions, expectations, pursuit, goals, preferences, values and the like. These constituents of the own-world are variables, which may take different values (including the value zero in some instances) in case of different agents. Naturally, the agent's own-world is continuously changing (enlarging, diminishing, and changing in content) during the entire existence of the agent. It goes without saying that a given agent (individual or collective) has knowledge, beliefs, experiences, emotions, ambitions, expectations pursuits, goals, preferences, values, etc., that is, a given agent has certain acquired as well as non-acquired abilities, which (or part of which) may be shared with other agents. A set of abilities shared by (individual or non-individual) agents constitutes the collective agent. The larger the collection of shared abilities is, the tighter the integration the

collective agent exhibits.¹⁷ If the shared abilities (of any of the collective agent's constituent parts) change, then the integration of the whole collective agent will also change.

3. The Participation Theory of Communication as a *lingua franca*

In this section we will argue that the conceptual tools of the Participation Theory of Communication make it suitable to serve as an interlingua or *lingua franca*. The Participation Theory of Communication offers the possibility of integration with respect to two aspects of research. On the one hand, the theory proposes a model that allows us to describe and analyze *the variety of communicative phenomena* in a comprehensive and unified conceptual and methodological framework. The most important components of the theory from this point of view were discussed in Section 2. On the other hand, the Participation Theory also offers itself as an interlingua or *lingua franca* that provides a mutual and interchangeable interpretative framework for *the various kinds of investigations in communication*. These investigations may and do appear in research projects in anthropology, cognitive science, philosophy, sociology,

¹⁷The more experience a group of friends share, the tighter integration they exhibit. The productivity of an organization depends on how well mutual expectations are understood among coworkers, that is, on how well the roles of positions are understood by members of the organization. These roles are often formalized and explicitly stated in job descriptions, and the productivity of mutual expectations can be further intensified by informal connections. Studying the integration and the productivity of the formal and informal functioning of organizations from this point of view is of utmost importance for the sociological investigation of organizations. (Cf. Jablin & Putnam, 2001.)

social psychology, and so forth. In this section we will discuss the Participation Theory as a proposed *lingua franca* in the multidisciplinary field of communication research.

It would be certainly beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to offer a definition of interlingua in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions of its conceptual framework, but we will describe the kinds of features a language must have in order to function as an interlingua in terms of functions or capacities. An important characteristic of natural languages is their economical nature; using a finite set of elements (semantic units and syntactical rules) we can produce an infinite number of complex meanings. For instance, we can describe cases and objects, state facts and dispositions, express opinions and emotions, and the like. Forming complex meanings is a process of several levels, and this process is a source of ambiguities and vagueness. Languages of science (or scientific discourses) aim to eliminate the ambiguity and vagueness of natural languages in relatively small domains (of discourse) by using a lexicon of precisely defined concepts. In other words, languages of science can be considered as partial alterations of a natural language for a specific purpose. Such alterations, however, have important consequences in terms of the original range of capacities natural languages possess. Natural languages have a capacity to refer to and discuss the very elements and functions of language itself. One of the crucial differences between natural languages and languages of science is that the latter has no use of this *metalingual* capacity of the former. For instance, the specialized language of physics has no need for, and hence, does not contain a capacity for discourse *about* the specialized language of physics, while in natural languages we can easily discuss characteristics of our use of language. (For instance, we can assert that our intended meaning was misunderstood, and the like.) Of course, languages of science *can* possess (“retain” or “regain”) the metalingual function

of natural languages. This is precisely the aim of the Participation Theory as an interlingua. Languages of science, however, usually *do not* have *lingua franca* aspirations (e.g. quantum physics intends to describe how things are, not how we can talk about how things are), therefore metalingual function is not retained or developed in most scientific discourses.

In order to avoid possible confusions in our discussion here, it may be useful to make the difference between *translation*, *metalanguage*, and *interlingua* explicit.

A given t_2 text in G_j language may only be considered a translation of t_1 text in G_i language, if

- the (extensional) descriptive capacity of G_j includes everything the (extensional) descriptive capacity of G_i includes – with respect to what is needed in t_1 (this can be mutual, but it is not a requirement for translation)¹⁸, and
- t_1 and t_2 are the extensional equivalents of each other in their own contexts. Whether or not two texts in different languages are the (extensional) equivalents of each other in their own contexts can be judged in two ways. It can be judged (a) by a speaker, who is competent in both languages; or (b) with the help of a metalingual analysis performed in

¹⁸ If the (extensional) descriptive capacity of G_j does not include everything the (extensional) descriptive capacity of G_i does, then G_j and G_i can be considered *local* with respect to each other (as a set of two). If the (extensional) descriptive capacities of G_i and G_j overlap (at least in part), and the (extensional) descriptive capacities of G_i and G_h also overlap (at least in part), but the (extensional) descriptive capacities of G_j and G_h do not overlap at all, then G_i , G_j , and G_h can be considered *vernacular* with respect to one another (as a set of three). Vernacular relation prevents translations, but it does not prevent mutual intelligibility.

a third G_k language. (The analysis can be extensional and intensional too, if G_k is rich enough.) (a) is the usual way of determining equivalency, but (b) – at least theoretically – is also possible.

G_k is a metalanguage in the sense that its (extensional) descriptive capacity must cover G_i and G_j , but this descriptive capacity does not need to exceed the function of describing and analyzing G_i and G_j – even though a wider range of functionality is expected from a natural language. That is why G_k is not a natural language; it is a limited language.

G_k can be considered an *interlingua* of G_i and G_j , if anything that can be described (in extensional sense) in G_i and G_j can also be described in G_k ; and if G_k is more explicit (in extensional sense) than G_i and G_j . G_k (having a metalingual function) can be expected to be more explicit with respect to given t_1 and t_2 texts than G_i or G_j (which do not have such metalingual function). The greater explicitness of G_k means that the scope of processes that can be performed by extensional tools is greater in G_k than in G_i and G_j , but G_k does not need to be richer in terms of intensional tools than G_i and G_j . If there are different degrees of explicitness, then there may be a language of maximum explicitness; it must be the “ideal language”.¹⁹ Furthermore, if there are different degrees of explicitness, then a language of minimal explicitness (or a language without explicitness) can also be conceived. There can also be cases when the differences between intensional tools cannot be disregarded; these are the cases when the intensional descriptive capacities of G_i , G_j and G_k are not the same (although they partly overlap), and

¹⁹ Eco (1995) gives a fascinating account of the history of seeking such a language, and of the impossibility of that very enterprise.

because of the different intensional tools, the languages cannot be arranged in a hierarchical structure. Wittgenstein's (1953) language games would provide an example for such (non-hierarchical) relationships among G_i , G_j and G_k .

The categories of the Participation Theory of Communication are metalingual in the sense described above; the Participation Theory, as G_k , has a greater (extensional) descriptive capacity than that of G_i , G_j languages of particular theoretical frameworks. This is so (partly) because the concepts of the Participation Theory of Communication are "parametrizable"; an agent can be described as a speaker on the one hand, an opinion leader on the other hand, etc. Therefore, different conceptions or models of communication can be described by the theory (e.g. the conception of communication based on participation as it is discussed in this paper, or the aforementioned interactional or transactional models). Parametrization can also match psychological, sociological, etc. categories. The Participation Theory is a specific interlingua in this sense, and it is also interdisciplinary in nature, in so far it presents a disciplinarily invariant or neutral language, in which translations of texts (describing concepts, problems, results, etc.) of different disciplinary languages can be provided.

The term 'parametrization' (or assigning parameters) is in need of some clarification here. In most cases by *reduction* we mean that a phenomenon is accounted for in terms of another phenomenon. For instance, accounting for chemical phenomena in terms of physical phenomena is reduction, because such a physical explanation makes chemical descriptions (with their special terminology and other linguistic means) superfluous, moreover, it also eliminates the separate or distinct ontological status of the chemical by reducing it to the physical. There is, however,

another kind of explanation in scientific conceptualization, which may also be conceived as reduction. We may use the term *agent* instead of *speaker*, *listener*, *spokesperson*, etc., and the differences characterized by the separate nouns in the latter terminology (*speaker*, *listener*, *spokesperson*, etc.) are expressed by different adjectives of the term *agent*. We may also construct the new term *agent* by keeping the original terms (nouns) as qualifications, expressing differences between different kinds of agents. In this case, we construct a conceptual position, from which we can talk about these phenomena in an integrated and more efficient (conceptual) framework, compared to the ambiguous descriptive position resulting in the undefined and ambiguous relations among the terms of the original terminology. The reductive nature of this approach can be observed in *epistemological* integration, while the previously mentioned approach (chemistry and physics) was an example for *ontological* reduction. In other words, instead of committing ourselves to a set of specific ontological types, the Participation Theory offers a way of characterizing categorically distinct types of phenomena by specifying the very features that separate them from other types. When assigning these features to particular types of phenomena, we need to apply certain restrictions; we need to assign values specifying this or that particular type. In this paper we call such a process ‘parametrization’ or assigning parameters.

To summarize, the Participation Theory of Communication is a *particular descriptive language* that describes communicative phenomena; it can be considered a *metalanguage*, in which other particular descriptive languages can be studied and interpreted, and it can also be considered an *interlingua*, in which a given description in a particular descriptive language can be translated into an equivalent description in another particular descriptive language. The Participation Theory of Communication is a metalanguage and an interlingua because it was designed to be

those. Although these features can, they usually do not characterize other conceptual frameworks, simply because in most cases conceptual frameworks are not designed to be a metalanguage and/or an interlingua.

A *lingua franca* (i.e., an interlingua) is a limited domain specialized language (and in that respect it is similar to languages of science), but it also possesses the metalingual function of natural languages. The metalingual function will be of utmost importance for the functioning of the language as a *lingua franca*. For what a *lingua franca* provides in (scientific) discourse is that theoretical concepts, statements, descriptions, theories, etc. formulated in different scientific languages can be translated into its language (a further function inherited from natural languages), and then – due to its metalingual function – can also be compared and assessed in or via its conceptual framework. This point (i.e., what comparing and assessing consist of) will be further elaborated in Section 4.

The starting point of the proposed conceptual framework is what we can all easily notice and observe; a variety of phenomena can be described and analyzed in terms of communication. The Participation Theory, however, does not characterize particular phenomena (at least not initially), but it first attempts to systematically and fully describe *the logical space* of the phenomena to be characterized. By ‘fully’ describing the logical space, we mean that all phenomena having a communicative character must be in and must be discussable in that logical space. Therefore, this conceptual framework of characterizing communication is not merely a model, but a theoretical orientation, a fairly general “ontological compass” as well; the framework provides logical space

for all that *can* be, although it does not necessarily commit itself to the *actual* occurrence of any possible communicative phenomena.

‘Communication’ has become an increasingly powerful and attractive buzzword for decades now in public life, education and science as well. The number of courses, programs, even colleges and universities bearing the term ‘communication’ in their name have multiplied internationally, and the number of publications in communication also shows a steady increase in the past few decades. The diversity of phenomena trying to make their way into the category of communication is even more apparent. For instance, Em Griffin’s *First Look at Communication Theory*²⁰ (which appeared in a number of editions) is symptomatic from this point of view. Griffin’s book – as it is expected from a textbook – attempts to collect and systematically describe the kinds of phenomena that are (or suspected to be) communicative in nature, but lacking adequate conceptual integrative principles, it does so by utilizing *ad hoc* methodological principles, even if these principles are intended to be systematic. Griffin’s book provides a detailed thematic map of the various kinds of research programs, but does not attempt to provide a conceptual and methodological framework, in which we could reconstruct and assess these programs in terms of one another, that is, we still face the problem that the results of different programs in communication research cannot be integrated.²¹

²⁰ Griffin, *ibid.*

²¹ For instance, even if a charitable intuitive answer about thematic agreement is accepted to the question what brings W. B. Gudykunst’s theory of anxiety and uncertainty management, S. Ting-Toomey’s face maintenance theory, and G. Philipsen’s theory of speech codes together under the heading of cross cultural communication in Griffin’s book, it is not clear *in what sense* they speak of the very *same* phenomenon, and how their findings *relate* to one another.

Unlike the Participation Theory, this type of approach fails to integrate the rich conceptual apparatus that was developed to understand, describe, analyze and explain specific phenomena, thus the relations between these independently developed conceptual frameworks remain hidden to the reader. This, however, is not necessarily the author's fault, given that research in communication, and hence, independent research projects trying to explore various communicative phenomena were never supported by, and could never be based on a model and theoretical apparatus that even attempted to provide the field with a comprehensive and integrated conceptual framework. Griffin's book, as well as other textbooks with the ambition of becoming fundamental and standard works in the field²², shows how difficult it is to integrate the variety of traditions on which research in communication can be based. Let us recall the fact that such research traditions include a wide spectrum from analytical theorizing (e.g. Grice, 1957, 1968, 1975; Searle, 1969 1995; Strawson, 1971) to investigations supported by sophisticated empirical methodology (e.g. Gerbner, 1969; Noelle-Neumann, 1980; Rosengren and Windhal, 1989).

In the previous section, we argued that the Participation Theory of Communication is a model for describing and analyzing the diverse phenomena that are studied as communication or communicative by various research programs. In this section we suggested that – due to its metalingual function – the Participation Theory can also serve as a *lingua franca* for comparing

²² Cf. the following works published in the past few years: Béres & Horányi, 1999; Infante, Rancer & Womack, 1997; Schiller, 1996.

and assessing different models in communication research. Let us turn now to some comments on and possible objections to the present formulation of the theory.

4. Questions and possible objections considered

From the point of view of scientific hypothesis formation and verification, the Participation Theory of Communication is at a stage where the disciplines devoted to describing, analyzing and explaining the communicative phenomena modeled (or to be modeled) by the theory can contribute to the further development and improvement of the Participation Theory in various ways. These disciplines can assess the viability of the theory in terms of its predictive power, they can evaluate the present formulation of the theory in terms of its *lingua franca* aspirations, they can propose questions to and possible problems with the theory, and they can also formulate suggestions for further research. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary project, such as the development of the Participation Theory of Communication, must also be supported by philosophical analysis from the point of view of the very formulation of a new conceptual framework that attempts to reorganize and reassess the heterogeneous and diverging field of communication research. In this section we will consider a number of such issues.

4.1 Interdisciplinarity

It has been a substantial question for communication research since its beginning how to determine the boundaries of its subject matter. (Of course, a number of other disciplines have also faced this question.) By now communication research has reached the point where it must meet the demands of two developments. One is that the extension of the concept of communication is broader not only than what naive communication theory and vernacular usage imply, but also than how communication research in the past conceived the concept. Again, these are problems that other disciplines also have to face from time to time concerning their own subjects. The other development is that investigations during the past decades have not worked out a unique research method (or methods) that specifically belongs (or belong) to communication research. In the absence of such a method, research in communication has turned to approaches belonging to other disciplines, and at the same time it is also widely claimed that communication research is interdisciplinary in nature.

A crucial component of the theoretical orientation of the Participation Theory is that it seeks for and offers a comprehensive and integrated conceptual framework *vis-à-vis* the conceptual *divergence* in communication research.²³ Since this divergence is the result of thematic *and disciplinary* diversity as well, the indicated need for such a framework can also be explicated in terms of the specific problems and questions raised by trans- or interdisciplinary research. If this

²³ Some of the published explications of the Participation Theory bear the term *Synopsis* as their subtitle and genre classification, which indicates both the level of elaboration of the theory and the intention to provide an integrated account, a *synoptic* framework for different investigations in communication.

understanding of the issues at hand is correct, then it is also of utmost importance to explicitly indicate the place and role of the Participation Theory among such interdisciplinary projects and investigations.

Some of the most important questions concerning interdisciplinarity include the following ones. *What are the motivations for and conditions of the recurring need for interdisciplinary approaches? To what type of interdisciplinary pursuits does the Participation Theory belong as a lingua franca: to a methodological or to a “semantic” type of integration?* (The former can be exemplified by the different positivist quests for a unified methodology. Cybernetics and semiotics are examples of the latter, “semantic” type of integration.)

In science, the requirement that different disciplines have to take into account the results of one another is a widely accepted rule with good reason. There are, however, more and more serious obstacles to fulfilling this requirement, because of the more and more industrialized technology of conducting scientific research. Even scholars/scientists of the same discipline can hardly follow, help, evaluate, etc. the research of one another if their respective specific areas are not “close enough” in the given discipline. Researchers start talking about interdisciplinary projects when two or more, from some point of view seemingly distinct and different fields of study, or from some point of view disciplinarily separated fields of study converge either in terms of their content or in terms of their methodology. *From some point of view seemingly distinct and different* means that interdisciplinary hopes and possibilities indicate that it may turn out that there is, after all, a perspective, from which phenomena that were once considered distinct and different can (and should) be categorized as ones belonging to the same type. “Same type” here

may mean either that these phenomena “may be studied by the same methods” or that the phenomena in question belong to the same “natural kind”. *From some point of view disciplinarily separated* means that the lack of precise specification with respect to the reasons for such separation here indicates that the separation (or in other cases the lack of separation) may be the result of various “internal” theoretical or “external” pragmatic (political, sociological, or even personal, etc.) reasons. Although historical, political questions, questions of the sociology of science, etc., concerning the autonomy of disciplines, the processes of “disciplinarization” and “interdisciplinarization” are certainly of great interest and importance, at this point in our discussion we would rather need to concentrate on the aforementioned “internal” theoretical motives.

Interdisciplinary perspectives may be attractive for various reasons: the need for describing, interpreting and explaining different phenomena in one comprehensive and integrated conceptual framework; adopting a perspective, methodology, or a conceptual framework that proved to be *successful* in another field of research; incorporating (by reduction) an already explored field into another area of research, and the like. Integration may appear as a methodological requirement or as conceptual integration.

There are a number of examples in the history of science for these disciplinary changes; we will only mention a few examples here. The integrative project advocated by the logical positivist philosophy of science in the first decades of the 20th century was based on a unified methodology shared by a number of areas of research. Cybernetics and semiotics – emphasizing different perspectives – may also be considered to be such integrative attempts. Integration, however, is

not a methodological requirement in these cases; the need for integration follows from the claim that the very same phenomenon is interpreted and studied either as a controlled system or as a system of symbols or signs. For instance, a family may be described (as it is done in sociological studies based on system theory) as a dynamic system, which has controlling functions. However, the same family can also be described (as it is often done in ethnographic field work reports) by the corpus of symbols or signs produced by members of the family using the symbol system available to them.

Cognitive science has been undoubtedly one of the most significant interdisciplinary projects of the past decades. This project is yet another kind of attempt for integration, with at least one noticeable and important change in the history of cognitive science itself. Early cognitive science advocated a neutral ontological position in the sense that it was offered “merely” as a theoretical framework, in which all sorts of disciplines may present their theoretical results, and may formulate their own questions and problems with respect to and in terms of the results of other disciplines; theoretical results previously confined within disciplinary boundaries were promised to become mutually available in this framework. This neutral position, however, has been challenged by a more characteristic reductionist claim and approach. For some time, most influential schools in cognitive science were busy with constructing models that were (or at least intended to be) neutral with respect to the specific implementation of the studied cognitive processes. That is, it was a widely (although certainly not exclusively) held philosophical and methodological position that studying the workings of the mind can be mostly separated from brain research and from our ontological commitments. In the past two decades, however, the results of cognitive neuroscience have been argued to seriously question this view. As a result,

many hold now that cognitive processes may not only be studied *as* neurological processes, but also that the former can, in fact, be ontologically reduced to the latter.²⁴ At present, these two schools or approaches are strong, influential and competing research programs in the field.

In integrative endeavors (thus in the case of the Participation Theory as well) we must systematically consider the possible ways of cooperation between disciplines, and we need to choose the ones most promising from the point of view of efficacy. Efficacy can be evaluated by answering questions, such as the following ones: *Will the inter/transdisciplinary (conceptual and methodological) tools offer new heuristics? Will these tools help us provide more successful predictions? Will we be able to discover reductive relations that went unnoticed earlier with the help of our new tools? Will they offer new types of explanations?*

In the case of the Participation Theory of Communication, questions regarding efficacy can be answered if “translations” of models and theories about phenomena of communicative character will be added to the present formulation of the theory. By “translation” we mean transcriptions of results (propositions, descriptions, explanations, etc.) which were originally formulated in the conceptual framework of different models of communicative phenomena, and which can be now “translated” into the proposed conceptual framework of the Participation Theory of Communication. We suggest that by translating the results of different models and theories into the proposed conceptual framework, these results will become mutually available for discussion

²⁴ For the philosophical foundations of the former – functionalist – approach, see Putnam, 1967, for instance. For an influential reductionist approach advocating cognitive neuroscience as the study of the mind, see Churchland, 1981.

and evaluation in the integrated conceptual framework of the Participation Theory. If the conceptual framework of the Participation Theory provides for more explicit descriptions than that of the models from which results are translated, then such translations may also reveal potentially problematic commitments of those models.

The process of formulating these translations will also require the assessment of which concepts and methods (and perhaps commitments) of the original (i.e., translated) theories (and disciplines to which they belong) the Participation Theory can accept and integrate without giving up its own conceptual framework, and which ones it must reject (and why it must do so). This process may also include revising the conceptual apparatus of the Participation Theory of Communication as well. It is needless to say that the goals and the anticipated benefits of any revisions need to be clearly and explicitly presented in all cases.

The issue of such translation is strongly connected to descriptions. Specifically, we need to clarify (a) the relation between a given description and the phenomenon described, and (b) the conditions of comparing different descriptions in terms of their equivalences or inequivalences. A description of a phenomenon in language G_i can be more detailed or even more complex than its description in G_j for several reasons. For instance, the conceptual apparatus of G_i may provide for more explicit descriptions than that of G_j does. G_i may express relations that are not expressed (as a contingent fact) or cannot be expressed in G_j , as G_i may designate items (entities, properties, relations, etc.) that are not designated (as a contingent fact) or cannot be designated in G_j . If using G_i results in more explicit descriptions, than using G_j , then it shows that the semantic system of G_j is less limited than that of G_i . This can be realized either as a fact characterizing G_j ,

or one may also look for the pragmatic rules (motivated by the semantics of G_j) that users of G_j may follow in order to avoid ambiguities, for instance, while using G_j . Although a state of affairs can be identified by the identity criteria of its different descriptions, some analysis is needed in every single case that distinguishes what is said *pro dicto* from what is said *de re*.²⁵ In other words, the analysis is needed to tell us whether a description is the way it is because the language of the description requires it or because the described state of affairs calls for it. Without such an analysis, merely the indices of the description are ascribed to the state of affairs in question, where the ascription is either adequate or inadequate; either relevant or irrelevant.

A description (presented in visual, audile, alphanumerical, etc. form) may be a record of research results, it may be (part of) the documentation of planning, and it may also be a starting point for executing a research program or some other project. To produce or to interpret a t_i description, the agent should possess a special ability; a special “dialect” or “sociolect”. Let us refer to this ability (or language) as G_i . So $t_i(G_i)$ means that G_i ability is necessary for (producing or interpreting) t_i . G_i may not be homogeneous, that is, it may include a number of abilities of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic nature. Furthermore, G_i may contain special components that are usually called models (m) or paradigms. $t_i(G_i, m_i)$ refers to the case when a given model is used in a description. For instance, Newtonian mechanics and Einstein’s relativistic mechanics are examples of such models that determine (constrain and enrich) what can be said in G_i . Transactional and interactional approaches to communication, cultivation analysis, etc. can also be considered such models. These possible models can be classified according to various criteria,

²⁵ The terms *pro dicto* and *de re* here are not identical with the terms *de dicto* and *de re* in modal logic.

e.g. according to disciplinary criteria; there can be numerous such classes or types in the psychology or in the sociology of communication, etc.

If t_1 and t_2 are descriptions, then, in order to consider them documents recording *research results*, they have to be determined by a model m_i : ($t_1(G_i, m_i)$ and $t_2(G_j, m_j)$). As we argued in Section 3, a given t_2 text (description) in G_j ability (language) may only be considered a *translation* of t_1 text (description) in G_i language, if, on the one hand, the (extensional) descriptive capacity of G_j includes everything the (extensional) descriptive capacity of G_i includes – with respect to what is needed in t_1 . This can be mutual, but it is not a requirement for translation.²⁶ On the other hand, t_1 and t_2 must also be the extensional equivalents of each other in their own contexts.

The relation between texts t_1 and t_2 (descriptions recording research results) is *interdisciplinary*, if $t_1(G_i, m_i)$ and $t_2(G_j, m_j)$ are extensional equivalents of each other in their own contexts, but in the very same G_i ability (language) different m_i and m_j models determine t_1 and t_2 . This relation also entails that from the perspective of one model a phenomenon might be seen as communicative in nature, while it might not be conceived as communicative from the perspective of another model.

As we mentioned before, a number of phenomena that were not considered communicative in nature turned out to be analyzable from communicative perspectives, and hence, can be considered communicative as well. The Participation Theory of Communication is a serious candidate for an interdisciplinary conceptual framework because it has the capacity for providing

²⁶ See also note 18.

translations of the type discussed here.²⁷ The descriptive language offered by the Participation Theory is not committed (ontologically) to specific types of communicative phenomena; the theory provides an ontologically neutral language in which different explanatory theories of communicative phenomena can be formulated in a way that disregards the commitments of these theories to specific ontological types. With the help of the *translations* of various theories constructed on the basis of different ontological foundations and assumptions, different descriptions of the variety of communicative phenomena can be compared. This will also make it possible to compare and contrast the theoretical utility and validity of these various descriptions without the need for necessarily eliminating one kind of description of a given phenomena in favor of other descriptions of it. The conceptual framework of the Participation Theory allows for discovering and analyzing the possibly different theoretical utility and validity of different descriptions of the very same phenomenon, should these different descriptions allow for *different* heuristics, predictions, and the like *from different perspectives*. The proposed conceptual space consists in descriptions: if x is a type, then x is such and such, etc. (without claiming either that x exists or that x does not exist). While the Participation Theory aspires to fully enumerate the already recognized types of communicative phenomena, it also allows for introducing new ontological categories, if the ontology of the translated explanations proves to be unsatisfactory (not excluding the possibility that the newly introduced types may later turn out to be reducible to types already in the stock of the Participation Theory.)

²⁷ One might see here some similarities between this development and that of logic. In the history of logic, progress is often made (at least in a sense) by discovering the formal (logical) characteristics of various phenomena that were not realized earlier as formalizable characteristics. Cf. note 5.

Since we argue that the Participation Theory is expected to solve problems, which are not resolved and/or to consider areas of research on communicative phenomena, which are not considered by other integrative approaches, let us mention one example here. Although cognitive science was not well suited for describing and analyzing social phenomena for a long time, some promising conceptions were formed recently to model the social sphere (e.g. D. Sperber's epidemiology theory²⁸ or M. Tomasello's learning theory²⁹), challenging the traditional approaches of this field. The Participation Theory can react to these developments by showing how the differences and the similarities between these new models and the traditional approaches in cognitive science can be explicated within the conceptual space offered by the Participation Theory. Without attempting to offer a detailed explication and criticism of Sperber's epidemiology theory, let us briefly consider some of the most important aspects and characteristics of his account from the point of view of conceptual apparatus of the Participation Theory.

Sperber's model for describing and analyzing social phenomena is determined by a methodological insight. Naturalist approaches often declare that there is a lack of continuity between (natural) sciences and social studies. Sperber, as a naturalist, suggests that the lack of continuity originates in the different ontological commitments of these fields. Specifically, so Sperber argues, social studies do not share the materialist ontology of (natural) sciences. The ontology of (natural) sciences requires that they describe their subject matter in terms of physical

²⁸ See Sperber, 1996.

²⁹ See Tomasello, 1999.

entities and causal relationships among them. In social studies, Sperber points out, other, ontologically unclarified and questionable entities (and properties) are hypothesized when describing and characterizing social phenomena. For instance, Sperber mentions some “standard metaphors which evoke the material character of social-cultural things: the mechanical metaphor of social ‘forces’, the astronomical metaphor of ‘revolution’, the geological metaphor of ‘stratification’, and so on” (Sperber, 1996, 11).

Sperber offers the epidemiology of representations as a “conceptual toolbox” to help us describe and analyze social phenomena with such ontological commitments that preserve the continuity of natural sciences and social sciences. The naturalist ontological commitment of epidemiology requires that explanations include no entities but ones that can be described as physical. (Of course, such descriptions may also be achieved by reduction.) Representations seem to be promising candidates for being such entities. According to Sperber, there are two types of representations: mental and public ones. An idea, for instance, is a mental representation. It is private, and it can be described by referring to certain states or events in the brain of the person whose idea is considered. Signals, statues, an utterance (which is obviously material in character), and the like, however, are public representations. Public representations can cause occurrences of mental representations in different minds (we recognize pictures, printed and uttered words, etc.), and mental representations can cause other mental representations (memories, thinking processes, etc.) as well as public representations (producing words, sentences, pictures, etc.). The spreading of representations in a human community thus can be explicated in terms of epidemiology, that is, in terms of how representations are distributed in the community in question.

According to Sperber, the social world consists of causal chains that lead from one's mental representations to other mental representations occurring either in the same person or – via public representations – in others. (It is worth emphasizing that the new mental representations are not identical with the ones from which they originate. They are not identical not only in the obvious sense of numerical identity, but they also differ in so far that representations can be interpreted in different ways by different individuals. Identical replication must be exceptional according to Sperber's account, and he considers this a new feature of his theory, compared to other similar accounts, for instance, compared to Dawkins' meme theory³⁰.) These processes of forming and spreading representations (from mental to public and from public to mental) result in a characteristic distribution pattern of representations in a given human community. Human memory (and other mental capacities) and human communication are the tools of these processes. According to Sperber, the social world is to be characterized by the distribution patterns of representations (revealed by rigorous empirical investigations) among members of smaller or larger human communities.

In terms of the Participation Theory of Communication, Sperber's theory of the epidemiology of representations is an account of the distribution patterns of *individual* mental and public representations. That is, from the point of view of the need to describe and analyze communicative phenomena that are collective in nature, Sperber's account does not seem to be successful. Let us explain.

³⁰ See Dawkins, 1989, for instance.

The individual representations (be either mental or public) in the same causal chain, that is, the ones forming a thread in the distribution pattern of representations, are not *instances* of an abstract representation that would account for the collective nature of social phenomena; they are individual “entries” in a statistical analysis. Given that distribution patterns are statistical characteristics, they (as methodological tools) do not allow the epidemiology theory to introduce entities (possibly collective entities) the social sciences would need in order to describe and explain social phenomena for which statistical analysis is insufficient. The epidemiological metaphor provides a way of characterizing the ways the distribution of ideas and other representations take place in a given community. According to this account, however, social phenomena lack the structure that would be necessary for accounting for cases when wide, or even statistically overwhelming distribution of similar representations in a given population does not explain certain events in the social world. For instance, the decisions of governments and the actions of countries (as collective agents in the terminology of the Participation Theory of Communication) may diverge from the decisions and actions most citizens would like to see. That is, although the epidemiology theory may show that (in a statistical sense) a given opinion (idea) is overwhelmingly widespread in the population, yet, it may well turn out that the community (e.g. a state) makes decisions and acts in ways that are not predicted and not explained by the statistical analysis of what members of the community would decide and would do concerning the issue at hand. The epidemiology theory fails in these cases because – due to its ontological commitment – it cannot accommodate *collective* entities. In terms of the Participation Theory of Communication there is void in Sperber’s theory when the collective cannot be sufficiently described and analyzed statistically. The Participation Theory offers the concept of *collective agency* as a conceptual tool for describing and explaining different social

phenomena in (communicatively) structured ways, but without specific commitments concerning the ontological status or nature of collective agents.³¹

4.2 Problem

Questions concerning *problem* (one of the central concepts of the Participation Theory of Communication) may be raised as part of the typology of the concept, and some of the important issues about this concept can be discussed in the context of the long-term uncertainty of the cultural conception regarding the distinction between *natural* and *non-natural* (e.g. between *brute*³² and *symbolic or institutional*³³). Questions concerning this distinction can also be formulated as question about our ability to categorize (using some procedure) entities as natural or non-natural.³⁴

³¹ See Section 4.3 for further discussion on the role of the notion of collective agency in the Participation Theory of Communication.

³² Cf. Anscombe, 1958.

³³ Cf. Searle, 1995.

³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the history of this opposition, and it is also unnecessary for our purposes here. The essence of the issue is whether we can study social phenomena, including communicative phenomena, by the means of evolutionary biology and psychology (i.e., by the means of natural sciences) or such questions are only accessible by the social sciences, such as sociology or anthropology. The dilemmas concerning the possibility and theoretical viability of naturalization are certainly not to be solved in this paper. Our discussion here is not a gesture towards a solution in terms of taking a side in this debate, but rather, towards the elimination of the problem.

This issue is also closely related to the very practice of communication research, because the discussion reinforces the following question: Is communication research moving towards the natural sciences or towards the social sciences? Or, in other words, what is the nature (in epistemological sense) of the questions communication research needs to answer?

Let us begin with considering a very simple example for a problem. The given temperature of the environment may diverge from what is desirable for an agent (there and then). If the difference between the actual and the desired temperature reaches a certain level, the agent will conceive and recognize it as a problem. Once the problem is recognized, the agent will intervene (if it can) in such a manner that decreases the difference between the actual and the desired temperature to an acceptable level. This is a straightforward example for a problem, nevertheless, it does not seem evident that this would also qualify as a paradigmatic example, for this example may be contrasted with other, seemingly very different *types* of problems.

It might be argued, for instance, that in the case of Black English Vernacular (or Ebonics)³⁵ in the United States, the problem and the process of articulating the problem were very different from the problem and its articulation concerning the temperature of one's environment. For a number of decades the characteristic syntactic, semantic and phonological features of Black English Vernacular were considered "mistakes" with respect to standard American English. As a consequence, children speaking Black English Vernacular were thought to be using English with

³⁵ Without attempting to give an exhaustive bibliography of the literature on Black English, see, for example, the following works: Baugh, 1983; Dillard, 1972; Haskins and Butts, 1993; Labov, 1972.

mistakes, and this perception was reflected in a number of ways in how their education was conducted (their language use was viewed as “bad English”, which was to be corrected) and in how their academic performance was evaluated. Once it was recognized that the systematic syntactic, semantic and phonological features of Black English Vernacular were not “mistakes”, but the characteristic linguistic features of a *dialect* of English, both the problem and its possible solutions were fundamentally reconsidered; „bad English” and a dialect of English are obviously different phenomena, and consequently, the educational needs of students speaking a dialect of English are also very different from students whose (standard) English is poor. In order to be able to solve problems resulting in there being different dialects of a language, the dialect first needs to be categorized (recognized) as such, instead of categorizing it as an incorrect or poor use of the standard form of the given language.

What is important about this example is that in the case of Black English Vernacular the very recognition and articulation of the problem themselves were problems (for a long time Black English Vernacular was mistakenly considered “bad English”, which prevented the recognition and articulation of the real problems raised by students speaking a dialect of English), and the conceptual structure of the problem seems to be very different from the problem of feeling too hot or too cold. It may be argued that examples of the *I'm hot* or *I'm cold* type might initially seem to be paradigmatic, but other problems, such as the one characterized by *Black English Vernacular* are examples of very different *types* of problems. The Participation Theory of communication, therefore, needs to be able to enumerate and account for a number of potentially very different types of problems, where the differences are to be traced in the conceptual structure of the problems.

We suggest that the Participation Theory of Communication is, indeed, conceptually equipped for accounting for different types of problems. Some problem recognizing and problem solving processes, for instance, may be linear, while in other cases they involve feedback and iteration; the conceptual tools of the theory presented in this paper can certainly accommodate such differences. The theory accounts for the differences among various forms (or types) of problems by accounting for the *abilities* and for the differences among the abilities that are necessary for recognizing and/or solving different types of problems. It is a crucial component of the theory that it identifies *abilities*, not merely knowledge, for instance. The term *ability* incorporates a number of possibly very different attitudes, such as *knowing*, *believing*, *being angry*, *being afraid*, *remembering*, *wanting*, *wishing*, *deciding*, and the like, and also objects of attitudes (from things to cases, and from the real to the fictional). There are also important differences among objects of attitudes, such as the differences among *knowing what*, *knowing how* and *knowing which one*. Accounting for the differences among various types of problems in terms of the abilities necessary for recognizing and/or solving them, of course, does not mean or entail the theoretical elimination of the differences among attitudes or objects and attitudes. The Participation Theory does not eliminate such differences, but it emphasizes *the common function*

of these attitudes and objects of attitudes in the context of recognizing and/or solving problems.³⁶ From the point of view of the abilities necessary for recognizing and/or solving problems the question of linearity is secondary; a process of recognizing and/or solving a problem might be of either type, depending on the kind of abilities involved in the process.

Apparently very different situations can be considered problems; therefore, there is nothing surprising about having to account for very different types of solutions. Thus, in this context, it is not surprising either that the conditions necessary for successfully recognizing and/or solving problems also prove to be significantly diverse.

However, these differences are less significant from the point of view of recognizing and/or solving problems than the question whether or not the agent possesses the necessary abilities *when and where* they are needed. If the agent possesses the abilities in question, then we can

³⁶ The typology of knowledge utilized by anthropologists (cf. Schweizer, 1998, for instance) is seemingly very different from the one described above. However, the differences between the two kinds of typologies are easily and straightforwardly interpretable and translatable. *Practical knowledge* in the anthropological sense (e.g. how to withdraw cash from a teller machine) is *knowing how* in our typology. *Lexical knowledge* (e.g. knowing the capital of Italy) corresponds to *knowing what*. *Conceptual knowledge* (e.g. what a family is) is partly knowing what (who the members of the family are, where they live, etc.) and partly knowing how (e.g. how the family makes decisions). There is also a fourth kind of knowledge, which is somewhat difficult to describe in exact terms: *everyday knowledge* is what we need to know in order to get around in our everyday life. For instance, we all have some idea about when we are ill, which is a mixture of knowing what and knowing how. This kind of knowledge has a crucial role in organizing our social life, because common sense results in various consequences; if I think I'm ill, I will see a doctor, I decide to change or decline my other appointments, and the like.

further investigate the source or origin of the abilities. We may find that the agent *originally* possessed them, as in the case of *non-acquired* abilities, such as pupillary reflex, or that the agent *acquired* them, as we learn how to count.³⁷

There are also abilities that can be regarded as combinations of the above described two types. Some agents possess non-acquired abilities which also require some prior learning process or triggering in order to be utilized in a given problem recognizing and/or problem solving situation. *Imprinting*, for instance, belongs to this combined category.

It might be suggested that the working of a number of abilities is accurately illustrated by the *key-lock paradigm*; the suddenly changing light values (as a specific input pattern, as a key) result in adaptation, that is, in triggering the adjusting mechanism of the pupillary reflex (as a lock). There also seems to be no other lock either; either pupillary reflex works or the quality of life of the agent suffers. Imprinting can also be analyzed in a similar way; the only difference is that the lock is not ready *in the first moment* of the agent's life. It is obvious that the agent needs a lock and what the key in the given case is, but the lock needs to be either found according to the circumstances, or it is still a semi-finished construction and needs to be completed or "finalized" some way or another. Counting, however, is a considerably more complex ability. We may well find out that we need to know that $2 \times 2 = 4$ in order to solve a problem without explaining much about the nature and functioning of the ability. $2 \times 2 = 4$ may mean the procedure of looking up the value 4 for 2×2 in a multiplication table, but it may also mean the procedure of first identifying 2×2 with $2 + 2$ and then executing it as a counting procedure, that is, counting to

³⁷ See also note 11.

4. In other words, if knowing how to use the multiplication table and knowing how to count are considered two different abilities, which may equally be sufficient conditions of solving the given problem, then 2×2 may be regarded as a key that fits more than one originally not possessed lock with the promise of success.

However, not all problem recognizing and/or problem solving abilities can be understood along the lines of the key-lock paradigm. The aforementioned example of categorizing Black English Vernacular and – to use a different example here – interpreting (as well as understanding) homosexual behavior are cases of recognizing and solving problems that defy such an account. Until very recently, the usual European and North American reaction to homosexuality was either medicalization or criminalization, which left no other alternative interpretation and response for those agents who (for various reasons) did not want to (or could not) understand homosexual behavior as abnormal (in a medical sense) or criminal (in a social and legal sense). Social movements (social and political organizations for minority rights in general and for gay and lesbian rights in particular), however, offered a different and considerably more complex way of understanding homosexuality (and their efforts resulted in various social and legal consequences in a number of countries). The new interpretation provides a different model of homosexuality, and eliminates the problem for which previously either medical or legal solutions were sought and offered. Considerably more complex understanding of the phenomenon in this case means that sociological, social psychological, anthropological, ethical, etc. discussions became relevant in the interpretative discourse, and the problem that previously was regarded as medical or legal, is now seen as a phenomenon that can be and has to be interpreted and understood by using a number of competencies and abilities with the promise of success. In other

words, a number of possible interpretations and answers became available to the previously very narrowly (medically or criminally) interpreted problem. This case of recognizing and/or solving problems, however, cannot be successfully described by the key-lock paradigm, since a number of possibly successful locks became available, once the traditional two interpretations were abandoned.

To summarize, the abilities necessary for recognizing and/or solving this type of problems cannot be regarded as instances of the key-lock paradigm. There are possibly a number of very different keys involved in these cases, and for these different keys there are even a greater number of significantly different possible locks, which may even be constructed and perfected during the process of searching for a solution to the problem or conflict at hand. Among these locks there will be successful ones and there will be insufficient ones; some will work smoothly, while others will hardly work at all. The *variety* and *openness* of these phenomena make it necessary to look for a different paradigm. The description of this kind of problem points at the need for abandoning the *linear* key-lock paradigm (which only allows for a number of still linear branches) for a different paradigm that accommodates *non-linearity*, where non-linearity is primarily conceptualized as a process that involves *feedback* and *iteration*. It is this non-linearity that makes the opposition of non-acquired vs. acquired abilities (coupled with the conceptions of feedback and iteration) suitable for fulfilling the function of the concepts of natural vs. non-natural, retaining the theoretical function of the opposition, while (hopefully) leaving their contradictions behind. This is, of course, only a promise (more precisely, a hypothesis) of the Participation Theory of Communication at the moment, and one of the conceived angles of further research is precisely the elaboration and the possible verification of this hypothesis.

4.3 Agent

The concept of *agent* is a fundamental constituent of the Participation Theory, both from the point of view of the explanatory capabilities of the account, and with respect to its proposed interlingua function. As such, the concept may receive special attention when evaluating the theory. We would like to consider the possible worry that the theoretical utility of extending agency, i.e., ascribing agency to subhuman and superhuman entities, is not immediately recognizable, and we will discuss this question in the context of how traditional notions of agency in the social sciences and humanities can be integrated in the conceptual framework of the Participation Theory.

According to the Participation Theory, the applicability of the term “agent” can (and needs to) be extended beyond its usual everyday and theoretical use; it can be applied to collective entities, which solve problems. This extension is not merely terminological. Although the formal criterion of agency is the ability to recognize and/or solve problems (from which it follows that a great variety of divergent entities are to be recognized as agents), this ability presupposes having a number of further characteristics. One of these characteristics is intentionality, since agents always ascribe meaning or purpose to the communicative. Communication in social environments is often recognized as communicative acts of groups (that are sometimes easier, sometimes more difficult to identify and describe), even though particular instances of communication occur between individual agents. Groups can have goals, they can make decisions, they are understood and treated by both individual and other collective agents as entities having goals, making decision, and the like. That is, describing such groups will contain

descriptions of emergent characteristics, and as a result, a group can also be described as an agent itself. This extension of the individual agent is the “collective agent”, which possesses knowledge or beliefs that can be described as “collective propositional attitudes”. In other words, the Participation Theory, at least in part, conceives and describes the intentionality of collective agents in terms of terminology originally developed and applied to describe and account for the mental content and states of individual agents. It is needless to say, however, that a number of characteristics of collective agents will differ from that of individual agents; we suggest that these features will be parametrizable in the theory.

Collective agents consist of individual (and possibly other collective) agents. A set of agents are integrated into a collective agent as a result of producing communicative relations among the members of the set. These communicative relations are (relatively) stable, and they give rise to a mutual (collective) own-world, to which we can refer as a unique identity (of the collective agent). The collective agent is (can be) recognized as a unified entity in the scenes it appears due to its stable (although not static) identity. Collective (propositional) attitudes are parts of the own-world of the collective agent. For instance, the registration office (as a collective agent) at a university will not allow students to drop courses after the third week of classes. All employees of the office know that this rule is a university regulation, since knowing the relevant regulations is part of their job description. A student requesting to drop a course after the third week of classes will be denied no matter which employee of the office takes his or her request; the foreseeable response from any employee shows the identity of the registration office as a collective agent.

We can also ask what areas and what aspects of the explanatory power or potential of the theory are enriched and/or increased by amending our theoretical ontology with subhuman and collective agents. Moreover, if the notion of agency is extended, does it entail that all problem solving entities belong to the same “natural kind” (even if the natural kind itself can be divided into subcategories)? What considerations would support or deny such ontological commitment? From the point of view of the answers to these questions we can also examine how successfully the Participation Theory may function as a *lingua franca*.

From the point of view of the explanatory power or potential of the Participation Theory, the question can be described as follows. The possibility of describing a phenomenon or an entity as *x* does not, in itself, entail that the description as *x* provides us with greater explanatory power or potential than describing the given phenomenon or entity as *y*. For instance, it is theoretically possible to describe the atmosphere as an agent (a collective agent). By this we merely mean that *if* we suppose that we are describing an agent, *then* atmospheric phenomena can be described as the behavior of an entity that is devoted to maintaining life on earth. Such a description, however, does not help us predict the weather more accurately.

The Participation Theory of Communication provides us with a clear conception of collective agency in terms of discussing individual and collective abilities, goals, and the like in an integrated conceptual framework. The potential of the theory, however, must be demonstrated by specific analyses. For instance, a detailed analysis should show how trends of opinions concerning public issues function as agents with respect to recognizing and solving specific

problems.³⁸ This notion of agency is somewhat removed from our usual (pretheoretic and even theoretic) notions of agency. The explanatory and predictive power or potential of the Participation Theory rests precisely in showing that these types of agents indeed function as agents when bringing decision making procedures to their conclusion concerning specific issues in the usual scenes of social actions. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to provide such detailed analyses; what we have presented here is the conceptual apparatus itself that the theory provides for the description and analysis of individual and collective abilities, goals etc. in a unified and integrated conceptual framework.

The present formulation of the Participation Theory of Communication also provides for integrating the notion of subhuman agency into the proposed conceptual framework. The abilities, goals, etc. of individual agents can be described and analyzed as the functions of cognitive subcomponents. These cognitive subcomponents confirm to the criterion of being

³⁸ For instance, if there are more than one trends of opinions concerning an issue or problem (which is, in fact, almost always the case), then their relations to one another determine how the (collective) agent solves the problem with the help of the (available) trends of opinions. Recognizing and solving problems will be characteristically different in case of (collective) agents that do and in case of ones that do not have an organizational structure. If the (collective) agent has an organizational structure, then the agent either exhibits an integrated identity on the scenes it operates, and hence, it is capable of recognizing and solving problems, or it does not exhibit such an integrated identity (which shows the disfunctioning of the collective agent), and hence, its ability to recognize and solve problems is diminished or the collective agent may even end up lacking such an ability. If the (collective) agent does not have an organizational structure, then it does not have a stable integrated identity either; its identity is merely determined by a common issue or situation, and problem solving is carried out along the lines of the most influential or popular trends of opinions (as it happens in case of elections).

problem solving entities, and as such, they can be treated as agents (subhuman agents) in the conceptual framework of the theory. From the point of view of the formal construction of the Participation Theory of Communication, cognitive science in the past decades worked precisely on this level of subhuman agency, providing numerous examples and empirical support for the claim that in case of subhuman agents, the conceptual framework suggested by the Participation Theory (in which agents are identified as problem recognizing and/or solving entities, having acquired and non-acquired abilities) allows for an adequate and effective description and explanation of cognitive abilities. In other words, we suggest that the conceptual framework of the theory (when adequately extended for this purpose) will also be suitable for translating the results of cognitive science, and hence, for integrating work in cognitive science with other endeavors in communication research.

It goes without saying that the present formulation of the Participation Theory of Communication is in need of further elaboration and support from a number of disciplines that work on describing and explaining phenomena and processes on the levels of superhuman, human and subhuman agencies. If the theoretical framework presented here is to be proven successful as an integrative *lingua franca*, elaborating and extending the theory with such analyses is of utmost importance from the point of view of further research.

5. Reflections and research program

In this paper (as well as in other works on the topic) the Participation Theory of Communication is not presented as a project for developing and/or improving society, nor is it presented as a theory providing means of successful communication, but as a scientific *hypothesis* rooted in the social sciences. As a hypothesis, the theory has not been “tested” yet. Nevertheless, the authors of this paper suggest that the results of the present formulation of the theory, most importantly, its conceptual and methodological framework, are applicable to the entire scope of communicative phenomena. We suggest that this is so because at the present stage of the development of the Participation Theory there seem to be no communicative phenomena or areas of research in communication, concerning which the descriptive and explanatory potential of the theory would be limited or restricted. Of course, we are also prepared to encounter limitations and restrictions in the future, that is, we certainly acknowledge that the theory is at an initial hypothesis stage at the moment, and it needs to face a rigorous “testing program” for verification or falsification. In other words, after the first phase of our research program, which consisted of forming and developing a hypothesis, we need to enter the second phase of the program, which is hypothesis testing.

We propose that the Participation Theory of Communication is a hypothesis worthy of such a testing program, for it promises a productive integrative conceptual and methodological framework in communication research. There are at least two avenues for starting the verification (or falsification) phase of the program.

On the one hand, the present formulation of the Participation Theory is in need of further elaboration and refinement in a number of areas (e.g. agents, institutions, scenes of communication, etc.). That is, there are important areas and aspects of the theory, in which new concepts are to be developed, and these concepts are to be integrated into the already developed conceptual framework of the theory. Such elaborations and refinements need to be carried out in connection with and in terms of both the already developed conceptual framework of the theory and the entire scope of communication research. If these projects are successful, and they result in developments, extensions and refinements of the theory that are coherent with the already developed areas of the hypothesis, then such results may also be regarded as successful tests of the hypothesis by those who hold that the validity and adequacy of a theory (hypothesis) are to be inferred from the coherence of the whole (“internal coherence”) and from the coherence and compatibility of the theory with other successful theories and research programs in communication (“external coherence”).

On the other hand, one may also seek to verify or falsify the Participation Theory of Communication as a hypothesis on the basis of its applicability in terms of empirical research and results. Such verification or falsification needs to be carried out in the form of case studies. The authors of this paper are committed to testing the theory by conducting case studies (as well as extending and refining the conceptual and methodological framework of the theory), although presenting the early results of such studies in progress was certainly beyond the scope of this paper. The suggested case studies need to show how the Participation Theory as a *lingua franca* enables us to compare and contrast two (or more) models (conceptions) of communication, or to translate the claims and results of one model into another, so that the separate models

(conceptions) can be substantially discussed, compared and assessed in a mutual and integrated conceptual and methodological framework. Case studies can be carried out by integrating already existing models and research programs (and their results), but we also suggest that the Participation Theory will enable us to recognize previously unnoticed problems, formulate new questions, and design new research programs, since the conceptual and methodological framework of the theory may not only integrate, but also refresh and reorganize our current ways of thinking about the diverse field of communication research.³⁹

³⁹ This work is fully collaborative; the authors are listed alphabetically.

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