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Signs and Things: Topology of Communication

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This text explores the topology of communication. Formation of the human being is realized in the process of communication, that is a kind of bodily interaction. When it is realized in space, it turns in different forms of social being – certain placements and conjointnesses. Sociality arises through the configuration of its ontological constituents – bodiness, placement and conjointness. The process of reproduction of conjointness occurs during the regular bodily interaction between people through certain social practices, due to which there is generated a certain message, that attaches people to its community with certain ideas and values. Social communication promotes the forming of symbolic space. Signs and symbols, soaking up the social experience, pull together and stitch together social reality in a single entity. At the same time people have to deal with things. How do things relate to the symbolic orders? We believe that the reconciliation between these two extreme positions on the issue of the primacy of real or symbolic worlds is possible only if we stop to see in things only “objective” objects, and see social force that produces a connection; as well stop to see in signs or symbols only a “meaning”, but see them as a social force, capable to work on the connection between people.

Keywords: topology of communication, bodiness, placement, conjointness, signs, symbols, things, symbolic space.

Formation of the human being is implemented in the process of communication, and that is a kind of bodily interaction. When it is realized in space, it turns in different forms of social being – certain placements and conjointnesses. Sociality arises through the configuration of its ontological constituents – bodiness, placement and conjointness. The process of reproduction of conjointness occurs during the regular bodily interaction between people through certain social practices, due to which there is a certain message generated, that attaches people to its

community with certain ideas and values. Social communication promotes the forming of symbolic space. Since the era of traditional societies up to the present time, people always make a variety of spaces, producing architecture, buildings and cities, which seem being an extension of human body. It does not mean that all surrounding objectivity is reduced to extension of the human body, as well as the social world can not be reduced only to the interaction of people. World is full of different things, which are produced of man-made forms of nature.

Social communication generates sign-symbolic systems, which serve not just as designated objects, but as a social force, which connect, guide and orient human interactions to the result. Signs mark up and delineate social interaction; they serve as interactive force, which helps understanding and coordination of human actions; they finally serve to the regular reproducibility of social connections. Sign-symbolic systems can not be interpreted in the spirit of Saussurean unity of signifier with the signified, they represent a social value, where signs determine not the area of “meanings”, but the area of coordinated actions. Signs and symbols, soaking up the social experience, pull together and stitch together social reality in a single entity. And this single entity appears as a single manifold, because includes a variety of forms of social existence.

At the same time people have to deal with things. How do things relate to the symbolic orders? In modern philosophy we see an urgent need for proper consideration of such elements of a social organism as symbol, scheme, code, practice or technique, inconsideration with the social aspect of the ontology. But in majority of cases there is a mixture of different ways of describing, we can see known inconsistencies, in many cases researchers tend to consider, for example, the real and the symbolic aspects of sociality in a semiotic reading.

In the context of socio-phenomenological method there is seemed to be well developed understanding of the meaning of social practices and techniques of symbolic space in the social ontological way (A. Schutz, P. Bourdieu, P. Berger and T. Luckmann, etc.) These researsches helped social-topological methodology to arrive in modern philosophy. But – in this – does not the symbolic suppress the self-contained presence of things? In classical metaphysics or sociology of symbols, and partly also in psychoanalysis, especially

during the time of its birth, the main was the idea of inexhaustible symbol (the signified). Structuralism contributed to an analysis of the sign (signifier), and social phenomenology began to consider the sign-symbolic entities in terms of social ontology.

The language, that can be defined as a system of verbal signs, is the most significant sign system of human society. Berger and Luckman noted: “General objectification of daily life is supported mainly by linguistic signs. In addition, daily life is a life that I share with others through language. Understanding of language is essential for understanding of the reality of everyday life” (Berger, P., Luckmann T., 1995: 65).

The roots of separation of language are in ability to send messages that do not directly express subjectivity here-and-now. This ability pertains not only to the language but also to other sign systems, however, the complexity and the huge variety of language make it much more able than other systems (for example, a system of gestures) to speak about the countless matters that have never be given to people in a situation face-to-face, and so the language can become an objective storage of huge variety of accumulated values, life experience, that you can save in time and give to future generations.

In addition, through a language a person objectifies his own, and does “my” subjectivity more “real”, not only for my partner in communication, but also for myself. Language also typifies the experience of the individual man and his experience, allowing distributing them in a broader category, in terms that have meaning not only for the individual man, but also for other people. Berger and Luckmann write: “So my biographical experience now is classified in the rules of organization of meanings and it is objectively and subjectively real” (Berger, P., Luckmann T., 1995:68). Due to ability to transcend the limits of here-and-now a language

connects different areas of reality of everyday life and assembles them into a single semantic field. As for social relationships, a language “updated” for the individual not only the current lack of people, but those who belong to his recollections and reconstructed past, and people of future, represented in mind by the individual.

According to Berger and Luckmann, “subject that is a designation that connects the different spheres of reality, can be defined as a symbol, and linguistic way by which such movements occur, can be called a symbolic language” (Berger, P., Luckmann T., 1995: 70). From now, a language detects an ability to construct a significant system of symbolic universe, which overlooks the reality of everyday life, such as: religion, philosophy, art, science. A language can not only construct the abstract symbols of everyday experience, but also turn them into objectively existing elements of daily life. So that human life is immersed in a world of signs and symbols. Within the semantic fields it possible to objectify, to save and accumulate biographical and historical experience. As a result of this accumulation there is a social reserve of knowledge that is passed on generation to generation, and available for the individual daily life.

Symbolic sphere is connected with the most comprehensive level of legitimacy and it goes beyond the practical application once and for all. “The symbolic universe is understood as a matrix of all socially objectified and subjectively real meanings, the whole historical society and the whole individual biography are considered as phenomena occurring within this universe” (Berger, P., Luckmann T., 1995: 150). In the semantic universe these separate spheres of reality are integrated into the semantic integrity, which explains them and at the same time justifies. For example, dreams can be “explained” by the psychological theory, they can be “explained,” and justified by the theory of reincarnation, as

well as by any theory, rooted in an increasingly exhaustive universe. Or, for example, incest can achieve maximum conviction for violating cosmic or divine order.

Symbolic universe provides for the procedure of the subjective interpretation of the biographical experience. Experiences related to different areas of reality, are integrated by including them in the same all-encompassing universe of meaning. «Nomic function of symbolic universe – write Berger and Luckman, – can be determined quite simply by saying that it» puts everything in its place «in the life of the individual» (Berger, P., Luckmann T., 1995: 160). And what would reject a person does not arise in respect of this order, symbolic universe allows him to “get real”, which is familiar for him.

Symbolic universe also orders the history. Thanks to him, collective events are linked together, including past, present and future. To the past there is a created “memory” that unites all those who socialized in the community. But does not this approach give the symbolic order and structuring their practices the priority status to things or state of things in general? However, coding theory that needs to study the structures of signs, may allow a certain appeal to semiotics, but to one that is not connected with structuralism. As the characters “exist” only as means of communication and the result of interaction processes. In structuralist conceptions of language signs are considered as the desired properties of speech and writing, and their dependence on the process of transferring the meaning is ignored. In future we we will think that signs and symbols can not be seen as something that surpasses the very things.

How can things mean something in our modern world in the age of technological civilization? Have a “value” or “meaning” in the semiotic sense? It seems to us that this issue is only possible in the field of ontology. So,

according to Heidegger, things that surround us appear not just as objects with some properties, but as make-shifts. It means to have possibility to dispose of future conditions of a thing.

From the ontological point of view, things can have any special meaning for human. Roland Barthes, balancing between semiotics and ontology, emphasizes that we should not mix terms “mean” and “report”; “to mean” is not just to transmit information (to be involved in a communication), but also to form the structural system of signs, that is essentially a system of differences, oppositions and contrasts” (Bart, 2003: 222). By “thing” we usually understand what is available to sight, what is conceived in relation to the thinking subject; finally, and most importantly, the certain thing is something made, a material that is rounded off, standardized, designed, that is subjected to the action of certain standards of production and quality; in this case, a thing is determined primarily as a commodity, the same idea of a thing is reproduced in millions of copies around the world: a phone, a watch, a pen – this is what we usually refer to things; the thing here finds it in space of sociality as a product of industrial practices.

The usual thing is defined as “something that is used somehow”, so a thing is completely absorbed by appropriateness of use, its function. And that’s why it serves for a human to influence the outside world, to change it, as a kind of mediator between the human and the action. Indeed, there is not a thing that would not serve for anything: even some trinkets always have certain aesthetic appropriateness. But at the same time the thing really serves for something, but it also serves to communicate information, and more – says Bart – the things always have a meaning that is not covered by its applying.

Functionality of watch is obvious. However, the look of watch always has meaning, regardless of their function: they are able to

demonstrate some other meanings – wealth, seriousness, respectability, etc. Not one thing, on Bart, escapes the meaning. Moreover, as a sign every thing is at the intersection of two axes: the symbolic coordinate (there is a kind of additional meaning in each thing) and the coordinates of the classification (in their lives, people are always more or less consciously have a classification of the things that sets the society). Such classifications of things can be important for example, in cases, where it is necessary to know how to arrange all the details in stock, or, for example, in a department store, there is also always some idea of classifying things, and it has certain regularity.

When the thing starts to mean something? This happens as soon as the thing starts to be produced and consumed by human society, as soon as it becomes the object of bodiless human interaction. Departing from a purely semiotic interpretation, it is necessary to understand ontologically that human interaction is not understood by the final states, but by itself – by that “between”, which is embodied in the bodiness and mediated by things.

Wanting to bridge the gap in understanding of the place and meaning (destination) between characters and objects, which often can be seen in the theoretical studies, Latour suggest considering the objects as a part of a heterogeneous network of relations. And so the concepts of “subject”, “actor”, “agent” are irrelevant here. “If you try to draw a space-time map of all that is present in the interaction, and outline the list of all those who are involved in any way in it, it is unlikely you will get a good, visible frame: rather – helical network with various dates, places and people “ (Latour, 2006: 176). People are different from other primates, the existence of which takes place under the watchful eye of one another, because they frame space of their interaction. At the same time,

people are the product of history, and therefore they are far beyond the “frame” of their direct relationships. And that’s why their relationship is always mediated by other actors from other places and other times. In other words, actions and interactions, in Latour, occur through the system of frames—locals, which limit interaction, and network – globality, which distributes simultaneity, intimacy and “personality” of interactions. The processes of globalization and localization are always mediated by things. This is another important difference between humans and other primates: it’s impossible to imagine a relationship between people with no mediating role in these things, it is impossible to imagine a desk without conversational device, doors, walls, chairs. They define the scope of interaction.

Human social life seems uneven and biased, and even because of this, researchers often refer to the notion of a symbol or symbolism. But is it made not in redundant manner? “Indeed – said Latour – symbols are used by us to refer to something that is currently lacking. Through this, people distinguish themselves from monkeys ... They often speak about the need to distinguish between social networks of primates and symbolic links of people. But this hypothesis doesn’t have a strong basis in the literal sense of the word: what are symbols based on? How only one mind can stabilize what can not stabilize the body?” (Latour, 2006: 183). Latour offers apply to those innumerable objects that monkeys don’t have, and people do – localizing and globalising their interactions. How would we summed daily balance office, says Latour, without formulas, receipts, invoices, accounting books – and how we can lose sight of the strength of the paper, ink durability, practicality, staplers and a loud bang stamp?

Objects can now be considered, from the point of view of the French scientist, in three qualities: “as invisible and reliable instruments,

as the determining infrastructure and as a projection screen ... In the role of elements of infrastructure they form the material foundation on which then there is the social world built of signs and representations. As projection screens, they can only reflect the social status and the basis for the subtle differences games” (Latour, 2006: 185). We can not rely on the actor and his actions, because the latter can not be the starting point for social existence, unless it is to stop a number of circulations, transformations, constantly affecting the social body. To act, by Latour means always to be covered by what you do. When one acts, other moves to action. Hence the impossibility of reducing of the actor to force fields or structures (this is what criticism of Latour of position Bourdieu based on (Latour, 1996: 74). You can only take part in the action, sharing it with other actants.

According to Latour, “to act means to mediate the actions of others”. He borrows the idea of “actants” from the structuralist theory of A.-J. Greimas, but considers it in the boundaries of social ontology. Actant is understood as an object or creature that makes an action or exposed. In order to deal with the social body as a body, – concludes Latour – we need: a) to treat things as a social fact, b) to replace two symmetrical illusions of interaction and sociality with exchange of properties between human and non-human actants, c) empirically trace the work of location and globalization” (Latour, 2006: 195). But leaving the power of symbols, which of interactionists or phenomenologists insist on the priority, does not come Latour to the statement of power of things, because in the culture of every society there is a certain body of narratives and metanarratives, which occupies a special position in relation to the totality of the actual characters that are available in the community? Can all these signs be reduced only to those that are built over things, as it is suggested by Latour?

Speaking about the significance of the symbolic, it is necessary to remember such important social-ontological character as “yin-yang”, “Star of David”, “cross” or “half moon”. These symbols embody the unity of the fundamental differences of the world, the understanding of which is stored in the social memory. At the same time the symbols assume various biased attitudes. This shift can be called metonymic, it is assumed to have a possibility of smoothly shift of meanings. Such metonymic meaning extremely common in the world of things, this is a very important mechanism, because a meaningful element is perceived and at the same time it is drowned, naturalized in the “here-being” of things.

We believe that the reconciliation between these two extreme positions on the issue of the primacy of real or symbolic worlds is possible only if we stop to see only “objective” objects in things, and see social force that produces a connection; as well stop to see in signs or symbols only a “meaning”, but see them as a social force, capable to work on the connection between people.

To show that the symbolic order can have some special status in the life of sociality, we partially give two reasons of R. Harre: from his point of view, firstly, in the social world nothing comes for as long as it enter into the world by socially constructed actions of a subject; secondly, even a simple piece of material, which does not have its own pre-history, is able to turn into a social object only because of its inclusion in a narrative (narration) (Harre, 2006: 121). Harre said that the subjects in the story are linked by three reasons: instrumental tasks, socially established conventions and informal traditions.

But contextuality of choosing a particular type of communication is determined not only by the narrative. It is also a culturally conditioned contextuality Harre emphasizes the concept of

affordability. It allows the material object, as determined by its material properties exist as not one, but as several social facilities, each of which is characterized by a specific role in the narration. Admissibility is defined by the space-time location that depends on established identities of material objects in social relations. Thus, the floor allows walking, dancing, placement of furniture, window allows views of the lake, escape from danger, peeping, knife cutting permits, threat, opening the window latches...” (Harre, 2006: 124).

Social objects have multiple admissibility, which is responsible for the variety of roles they perform in the narration. It is the practical admissibility by Harre that provides complication of the plot in the narration. Despite this order of reasoning, Harre clings to the assertion that «the genesis of social objects symbolic ordering of things takes precedence over material” (Harre, 2006: 124). Material conditions for him are only stops in connection to the social order, which is designed to efficiently accommodate this environment to human needs. While here, he admits that “in spite of the above, it can be argued, for example, that the role of priests as a predictor of the annual Nile floods affected the nature of the social structure in agriculture of ancient Egypt. Geographical features of the Nile Valley indirectly influenced the formation of the social order, which recognized the power of the pharaohs” (Harre, 2006: 131).

From the Harre’s point of view, people have always existed in a kind of social order. One of its sides – a practical system – was to maintain the social conditions of life support in a particular environment. This reveals the priority of residence. The other side – the expressive system – was in social institutions responsible for creating the hierarchy of honors and positions. Any material object, as a necessary element of a practical nature of a particular culture, has its

place and its expressive structure, and, according to Harre, expressive system has a priority position in relation to the practical. In this case, the narratives that support these two orders are radically different. In the end, Harre concludes that “the whole social life is nothing more than a symbolic exchange and the joint construction of meanings and to the meanings of things” (Harre, 2006: 132).

We will not dwell on identifying inconsistencies of Harre, as his position on the priority of the symbolic order in rem against all topological terms, that we expressed earlier. Since the era of the traditional society placement in space is made symbolization of space, implying homology between human fertility and the fertility of the fields, and because they both are products of the union of male and female (yin and yang), solar heat and humidity of the earth. An ontological orientation of thought in the philosophy of the twentieth century led to the understanding that human is not able to find himself somewhere inside. He finds himself only on the border to the other, in the construction of body, home, and all the surrounding area.

The connection between things and narratives (by Harre) seems to us extremely important and productive. In fact, the basis of every cultural tradition was the corpus of metanarratives and narratives, which was caused by some “state of affairs” and stored, and transmitted as a socially meaningful experience. This is a symbolic universe, a kind of “excess meaning”, which in the form of sign-symbolic layer rises above any current “state of affairs” presenting certain narratives formed in specific historical circumstances.

Generally, the signs are the result of human involvement in the joint space of existence. And social reality is to be understood not only as the environment of people, but as a symbolic way to organize, and thus a marked for their related

activities. The presence of signs in social reality serves as a condition of mutual understanding and coordination of actions and interactions between people, and thus contributes to the mechanism of reproduction consistency. Signs of Another are the signs for my own existence.

Signs, delineating, bring people and things in a common space of interaction, giving them its direction. Defining the social nature of the sign we can not limit its role in the constitution of the general horizon of meaning, it is necessary to see its place in the division and layout of the space co-existence. In this case, the subject of the picture will be not semiotic world, but the world of human affairs and their relationships. But on the other hand, any human existence assumes a group relation. Communication involves the community – common – achieving of common to different and unequal, the effectiveness of interaction of which is necessary to understand from communication of the group in a particular situation. In this case signs reveal their social purpose as they act only in terms of the convention, when people in its being based on their total social experience and prospects of joint cooperation.

Social scientists noted that with the emergence of city-states there began a profound change in the joint life of people: a city becomes a form of territorial isolation and internal consolidation, the opposing world of tribal and external fragmentation, ethnic and cultural center of attraction and repulsion, and the place of origin of the value self-awareness. This contributes to the emergence of a wide field of intercultural communication and symbolic exchange. Civilization (from Lat. Civitas city, civil society, state) – is a way of self-identification of the value of modern humanity in its relation to nature, society and culture.

In the frames of European cultural tradition has been made three communicative practices

promoting social reproduction: traditional, scientific, political- communicative. Traditional pragmatics of communication characterized by the dominant position of metanarrative (Mahabharata, Torah, Bible, Koran, etc.), which present knowledge as a different kind of social skills – to know what to say, what to listen to and what to do within a particular society. This reveals the social meaning of knowledge. Science which focuses on the search for the truth is a special case of social science, because science is derived from the “skills” of survival together. Metanarrative here presented as a “tale”, which states “samples” of seeing the world and proper behavior, and that’s why it serves as the “education”, which serves to provide social connections. Actually, this expresses the essence of culture, which is the core of the educational community.

Complexly mythological metanarrative structure includes a plurality of different statements – prescriptive (prescribing), question, estimated, denotative (about the objects of the world), etc. Through them there is a transferred set of pragmatic rules (the ability to speak, listen, and do what is frowned upon by some societies) that constitute the social connection.

Within metanarratives there are two produced universal semantic-communicative forms for preservation and transmission of meaningful content – confession and sermon. Both of these forms are based on the dialogic structure. Confession, consisted of repentance and supplication, dialogically promotes saying the reliability of the inner world of man. Sermon consisted of surprise, parables, citing the authority and proper utterance of preacher, contributes to the general problem of the transfer of the dialogic pragmatic rules. The European tradition is based on the Greek-Christian cultural matrix from which the values were developed by the Greek soldiers – solidarity, responsibility and courage, and the values of existential Christians –

faith, hope and love. Greek myths as a society of soldiers learn to base their behavior on reason or wisdom. Biblical mythology shows us the discourse of confrontation, dividing society on just and unjust, rich and poor, and teaches people how to solve their relationship, following the command of the heart, based on love.

Even in the depths of a traditional Greek society in the philosophical environment scientific pragmatics of communication begins to form. It included both the research process, as well as training in translation of scientific knowledge, which indicated the role of mediated social ontology, revealing the existence of pure knowledge not for pure knowledge, but to serve the social reproduction. And that’s why knowledge presupposes the unity of the consciousness and the recognition. In ancient times scientific knowledge carried out by undermining traditionalism logicisation and irony, demanding not to take knowledge of the faith. In scientific discourse interrogative statements must necessarily marry denotative designed to lead to a unique truth.

In communication scientific pragmatics makes a demand of the ability to provide evidence and reject contradictory statements. And it is also expected, as in the communication between a teacher and a student, that the recipient agrees, and that the lecturer will speak in the appropriate terms. Scientific communication involves two rules: a) there is a referent, that offers an argument to prove, b) one and the same referent can not have a lot of contradicting evidences. So the truth of the statements and revealing their competence the sender dependent on the approval of the group. Hence the need to form unmatched by including them in the learning game. Consensus and teaching are fundamental components of scientific pragmatism. Hence, in a pure form, it does not exist and can be seen only through the prism of social ontology. This model of communication emerged in the era of modern

times, when there was active and practical mastery of the world, when there was the formation of capitalist relations and the required new values that govern human relations. And they were liberty, equality and fraternity.

Modernity is characterized by the dominant position of information and all kinds of communication flows in sociality. In modernity there are political and communicative pragmatics. Social space-time in the present is a moving and

multiple field of interaction of social agents, belonging to different practices and techniques, where their behavior is essentially nonlinear. There is the intersection of physical and communication techniques, the agents of which are social singularities. Intersection singularity turns into a certain realization-in-time-and-space of «network» character, where it occurs only in some constellation points and can vary depending on the position of agents of sociality.

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Знаки и вещи: топология коммуникации

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В статье исследуется топология коммуникации. Формирование человеческого бытия протекает в ходе коммуникации, представляющей собой род телесного взаимодействия, которое, опространствливаясь, превращается в различные формы социального мира – определенные местности и совместности. Социальность возникает через конфигурирование таких ее онтологических составляющих, как телесность, местность и совместность. Процесс воспроизводства совместности происходит в ходе регулярного телесного взаимодействия между людьми посредством определенной социальной практики, благодаря которой порождается определенное со-общение, способствующее при-общению людей к своему со-обществу с определенными представлениями и ценностями. Социальная коммуникация способствует порождению символического пространства. При этом людям приходится иметь дело с вещами. Как последние соотносятся с символическими порядками? Нам представляется, что примирение между этими крайними позициями по вопросу о первичности вещного или символического миров возможно в том случае, если мы в вещах перестанем видеть только «объективные» объекты, а увидим социальную силу, производящую связь; равно как и в знаках или символах перестанем видеть только «значения», но увидим в них также социальную силу, способную работать на связь между людьми.

Ключевые слова: топология коммуникации, телесность, местность, совместность, символическое пространство, вещи.
