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ABSTRACT

In this paper post-truth mechanisms in discourse are taken into account and the attempt is made to understand how language is used in communication characterized by post-truth. A brief description of the word *post-truth* is given, together with some etymological notes which can shed light on how truth is conceptualized in various languages. The meaning of *post-truth* and its denotation are then discussed, and it is shown that people involved in communication about post-truth as well as in post-truth messages do not rely on personal common ground, which requires a serious ontological commitment and genuine interpersonal relations. Without such a commitment no communication can be taken seriously and only ideological constructs with poor relevance for human life are left.

1. Introduction and methodology

The noun *post-truth* has been present in the English-speaking world for over twenty years. It was picked up and spread all over the world during 2016 and for this reason, at the end of those 366 days that shook the political agony and the opinions of the mainstream media, it was chosen as the Word of the Year by *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

This expression is used to denote what since 2016 has been taken to represent a structural change in public communication. A polarization frame has been activated and "post-truthers" are marked as "the baddies": the label has been assigned them by the community of post-truth "critics", who consider themselves as "the goodies". In fact, what is denoted by *post-truth* is also related to an increasing distrust towards the representatives of political institutions and media landscape. This distrust can damage the possibility of a genuine communication, which relies on interpersonal work and willingness to participate in the construction of a common good.

In this contribution I adopt a discourse pragmatics viewpoint that studies communication as a verbal, social and rational activity (Rigotti 1993, 43–148; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 1). I first present (Section 2) a structural and etymological analysis of the word *post-truth*. Then I describe the context in which it has been formed and the phenomenon it denotes (Sections 3 and 4). The position of the "critics" is not the only one in discourse: there are reactions to the dominant interpretation, but this position is not adequately focused on (there is no key word that contrasts *post-truth*). However, it requires consideration (Section 5) both for reasons of representativeness (all argumentative positions must be taken into account) and because it shows that the expectations, values and beliefs that guide human existence cannot be ignored.

In the discussion in Sections 6–8, elements in favour of a communication model are presented that can serve to devlop a different point of view on the phenomena referred to by the word *post-truth*. The anthropological dimension of communication emerges, which cannot be reduced to a simple exchange of information, but it can be related to the orientation towards the good which is characteristic of human nature.

2. *Post-truth*: the word, its structure and its behaviour

Let us first describe some structural characteristics of the expression *post-truth* together with its etymology. The analysis considers the cognitive dimension of language as the folk model of the world (Shaumyan 2005). Some crucial elements emerge which will be useful for the discussion in Sections 6, 7, and 8. On the one hand, the structure of a word gives shape to the observed reality. On the other hand, the etymology of the word helps understand culture and tradition.

2.1. A structural description of post-truth

In terms of syntactic behaviour, this expression tends to occur as a modifier in noun phrases like *post-truth politics*, *post-truth era*, *post-truth problem*, *post-truth society*, *post-truth world*, etc. When *post-truth* is used as a modifier, it ascribes a quality to the denotations of words like *politics*, *problem*, *society*, *era* and *world* which are nouns. Already Priscian wrote that *nomen significat substantiam*, a noun "poses", assumes the existence of a way of being[1]. In the expressions just considered, complex phenomena are "posed" or conceptualized as entities. In fact, politics consists of a series of activities, it is not an entity. A problem is a situation, which can regard entities, without being an entity itself. A society may by understood as an aggregate of people, but it is not as an individual entity. An era is a time period, but not an entity. A somewhat different case is represented by *world*, used to denote the life and activity of individuals[2]. Generally, what is denoted by these words is grasped as an entity. Used as a modifier, *post-truth* denotes a quality of discourse moves by individuals, but it tends to shift from these activities to the complexity of each individual and it becomes a label attached to people and their behaviour.

When *post-truth* is used as a noun, it can be related to an abstract representation of the social and political reality as "divided into two hostile and irreconcilable camps" (Thom 1989, 28)[3], in which it characterizes the claims and statements made by people

of the opposing field. It is typical of an ideological production that words should precede the reality they denote: in ideology, words produce what they refer to. According to this tendency, those who have spread the word *post-truth* have activated a cognitive frame (Lakoff 2004) establishing which propositions have the quality criterion denoted by *truth* and which lie outside of this domain. In fact, the use of the prefix *post* indicates that the meaning of *post-truth* is conceptualized as a movement away from what is accepted as the truth.

2.2. On the etymology of truth and the various conceptualisations of truth

An etymological interlude on this word and some equivalents in other languages seems to be appropriate in this case. Let's consider the prefix first. It traces back to the Latin preposition *post* 'after' that occurs in expressions like *post hoc*, *post facto*, *post meridiem* which came into English in modern times and developed a prefix that characterized words like the adjectives *post-classical* and *postdiluvial* that appeared in the first part of the XIX century. In American English the expression *post-bellum*, which came into use after the Civil War, and several other words show the productivity of this word pattern. In the 1970s *post* developed the sense 'beyond', 'irrelevant'; it occurs in an adjective like *post-racial* that according to the Merriam-Webster indicates a society "having overcome or moved beyond racism; having reached a stage or time at which racial prejudice no longer exists or is no longer a major social problem"[4]. On the basis of this definition, *post-truth era* denotes an era that has reached a stage or time in which truth no longer represents a valid criterium of knowledge. From this viewpoint, the prefix used in *post-truth* seems to be akin in sense to the German prefix *über* as it occurs in *übermenschlich*, *Übermensch* – a word that Friedrich Nietzsche employed to denote an entity 'beyond the human'.

We come to *truth* now. This is an abstract noun derived by adding the suffix *-th* to the root of the adjective *true*. Both words are etymologically related to the German adjective *treu* which means 'loyal, faithful'. A similar sense is expressed by the occurrence of *true* in Polonius' words to his son Laertes, who is leaving for Paris[5]. According to Kluge (2002, 928–929), *treu* and *true* can be related to the Lithuanian adjective *drutas* 'fast'. It cannot be excluded that they have the Indo-European root **dreu-/*deru-* with the generic value 'steady, fast'. This root can be found also in *tree* as well as in the Russian *derevo* 'tree' and the Ancient Greek *drys* 'oak'. A conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 3–6) can be recognized here: truth is something that is as steady as a tree with strong, deep roots. What is true is conceptualized as a stable and constant element. Some similarities can be found with the etymology of Russian *istina* 'truth': according to Vasmer[6], two Indo-European deictic elements **is* and **to-* are combined here (like in Lat. *iste*), both with the orientational value of the demonstratives 'this/that'; the combination produced an effect of insistence and gave the meaning 'this very same'. It can be assumed that truth is conceptualized here by means of an act of pointing with insistence to something: it presupposes someone who performs a deictic action. A third metaphor emerges in Lat. *verum*, Germ. *wahr* and Rus. вера (with the sense 'faith'; transliterated as *vera*): these words are traced back to an Ie. root **uēr* that according to Kluge had the generic value 'trust, faithfulness,

concord' (Kluge 2002, 968). In this case, truth is conceptualized as a relationship, a bond you can rely on. This crucial aspect will be considered later (Section 8).

Of course, these etymological assumptions do not refer to the notion of truth, but to its various categorizations in the languages considered and to the different linguistic images of the world that are reflected in the relationship between culture and language[7]. It should also be pointed out that these aspects concern the anthropological-cultural repository of a language, not the psychological-cognitive dimension of individuals. In any case, two aspects should be taken into account here: on the one side, the metaphors have "faded"[8] in the words considered above; the motivation for the construction of these words has disappeared and the link with the denotation has become arbitrary, i.e. unmotivated. Such development occurs with high frequency in the diachronic change of lexical elements. On the other side, it is to be noted that meanings belonging to the intellectual sphere arise thanks to conceptual metaphors that start from the physical sphere of elementary experience. *Truth* and its counterparts in other languages show the cognitive need to rely on more concrete dimensions. Perhaps this need arises also in the tendency to conceptualize as entities those phenomena and activities that cannot be delimited. The need for concreteness is also found in *post-truth*, whose meaning is constituted as an entity moving away from truth.

3. *Post-truth*: the word and its usage

Let us now consider how the expression *post-truth* is used in public discourse between 2016 and 2018. From a virtual corpus that includes texts in paper format and documents that can be collected from the Internet via *WebCorp* (see Gatti and Rocci 2014, 123–148) I have selected a very limited concrete corpus made up of the documents that best represent the position of the critics of post-truth. I have followed here the qualitative criterion of representativeness (Niehr 2014, 130–131). I have considered also the "method of discovery" proposed by Georg Stötzel according to which a key word can be identified when the use of the word in discourse is described or debated (Stötzel and Wengeler 1995, 2), i.e. when the linguistic use becomes the object of discourse moves in a metalinguistic function. Among the documents I have chosen are dictionary entries and passages from works of analytical philosophy in which *post-truth* is treated as the key-word in discourse. I have also included the documents that are most frequently cited as paradigmatic instances of post-truth.

These documents are considered from a pragmatic perspective according to which the sign nature of the message has several dimensions. According to Bühler (1934), a communicative event is a sign for a triple aspect: it is a symbol, as it refers to[9] a situation (*Darstellungsfunktion*); it constitutes a symptom, as it gives voice to the emotions and attitudes of the sender (*Ausdrucksfunktion*), and it is a signal as it is received by a recipient (*Appellfunktion*). These three aspects constitute three dimensions which are present in a sign having a verbal nature: the messages which exhibit the word *post-truth* must be understood in this triple nature of symbol, symptom and signal.

3.1. The "senders"

We assume that the history of the agents involved in communication can shed some light on the messages considered. These agents are, for the most part, scholars and academics, critics and opinion leaders who intervene on the media and social media. More specifically, the senders are involved in an "emic" position, that is, they belong to one of the parties involved in the discussion. It is not easy, however, to take an "etic[10]" position here, since framing seems inevitable in these cases. Let's try, however, to move away from the senders' positions and consider the use of *post-truth* from the point of view of an external observer.

A crucial point must be made here: in our corpus, the word *post-truth* is used by agents to refer to contexts that are themselves speech events, and these have a sender and an audience of recipients. The senders of the first type consider themselves as the "truthers", i.e. the "critics" of the speech events qualified as post-truth. The truthers call the senders of the second type "post-truthers". From a pragmatic viewpoint the situation is dynamic and multi-faceted, because the truthers address an ideal public of people who, in their opinion, should agree with them. The post-truthers are not their ideal addressees, although they are present (in the context), but with no right to speak. But these sometimes react and do not accept the label received.

3.2. The idealtyp of post-truther

Critics using *post-truth* refer to statements that, in their opinion, other subjects make with the claim that they are valid for the very fact that they are strongly affirmed and shared within a community. In the reconstruction made by the same critics, the expression *post-truthers* refers to those who do not consider it relevant to verify whether the situation referred to by a given proposition corresponds to a fact, because they "feel" that their claims are valid and consistent with their beliefs. This, however, concerns above all the addressees who "feel" the validity of the claims made. It is not necessarily the case that the senders (those who are responsible for disseminating such statements) share this attitude. According to Lee McIntyre, those who spread post-truths are mostly shrewd politicians and communications workers who belong to a party generally labeled as "right wing":

> […] largely left-wing relativist and postmodernist attacks on the idea of truth from decades ago have now simply been co-opted by right-wing political operatives (McIntyre 2018, 7).

The allusion to the representatives of post-modernism is clear, and they are responsible for having developed appropriate tools for effective manipulation. In this regard, the Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris believes that a post-truth frame admits the existence of more "truths", just as with postmodernism. But there is a difference: "postmodernism […] is convinced that its alternative truths are absolute truths […]"[11], since truth and interpretation are made to coincide and each has the same validity as the others. Instead, in his view, "[…] the post-truthers state that the best way to state one's own truth" is to call one's neighbor a liar[12].

McIntyre notes a similar procedure, but he observes it from the recipient's side: "post-truth is when one thinks that the crowd's reaction actually *does* change the facts about a lie" (McIntyre 2018, 9). According to both interpretations, post-truthers discard the confrontation based on reasoning. They choose the clash, in which they deny validity to the statements of others. For critics, these statements refer to facts; for post-truthers, they refer to lies. However, what counts here are the different cognitive attitudes and positions that, in public communication, the senders and the addressees of post-truth statements have: in fact, the senders may be liars and manipulators, but their public is made up of individuals who need to trust in authoritative sources.

3.3. The lexical meaning of post-truth

The Oxford Dictionaries dictated the interpretative line to the whole *parterre* of the critics. In addition to having chosen *post-truth* as the English word of the year 2016, they also offered a clear and concise definition of it: "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief"[13]. A similar description has been proposed for the German equivalent *postfaktisch*: the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache* chose it as the "Word of the Year 2016" for that language (to tell the truth, they had poor imagination, as the English definition was repeated …); when the Teutonic scholars describe its meaning, they note that in the political and social discussions of today emotions are increasingly given pride of place with respect to the facts[14]. The incipient era of post-truth is marked by the claim not to truth, but to the "felt truth".

Instead, the definition proposed by the *Vocabolario Treccani* for the Italian equivalent *post-verità* refers to argumentative moves that are characterized by a strong appeal to emotionality, but since they are based on widespread beliefs and not on verified facts they tend to be accepted as true, thus influencing public opinion[15]. It is likely that the word *argumentation* is used in this vocabulary to denote a discourse that aims to persuade with strategies of various kinds; but in the theory of argumentation this word has a specific meaning that denotes the speech acts accomplished by those who aim to convince other persons.

The philosopher Lee McIntyre has further developed the topic. In his opinion, *post-truth* represents "a catch-all phrase" which includes "the obfuscation of facts, abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning, and outright lying" (McIntyre 2018, 1). In a different perspective, Matthew d'Ancona relates *post-truth* to the public's reaction:

> […] "post truth" is emphatically not the same as lies, spin and falsehood. What is new is not mendacity but the public's response to it – the growing primacy of emotional resonance over fact and evidence, the replacement of verification with social media algorithms that tell us what we want to hear. Truth is losing its value as society's reserve currency, and legitimate scepticism is yielding place to pernicious relativism[16].

The public's response to post-truth is treated as a coping mechanism that can reduce stress, but this hurts the truth and legitimizes relativism. One could observe that,

thanks to post-truthers, the light has come and the traditional truth criterion has risen upon postmodernists.

4. The application of the post-truth frame to political communication

As we have seen, since 2016 the word *post-truth* has been systematically used to denote a strategy of political communication. When critics cite clear examples of texts labelled as post-truth, they refer to discourse moves made before the vote for Brexit and during the election campaign for the American presidency in 2016. These same examples will guide the discussion from Section 6.

Donald Trump's direct statements and the texts prepared by his staff can indicate deception and indifference to the truth as a criterion of knowledge and cynicism. President Trump was also charged with exporting post-truth to the UK. A Sky political commentator made this reproach when, during the campaign for the Brexit vote, Minister Michael Gove (as well as many others) claimed that membership of the EU cost the UK more than £350 million a week. About this *The Guardian* wrote that

> […] Sky's political editor Faisal Islam said Mr Gove knew that figure was wrong, and accused him of importing the "post-truth" politics of Donald Trump to the UK[17].

According to the media, Trump increasingly resorts to post-truth, as time goes by:

> The Donald Trump administration is increasingly developing into a post-truth presidency and the costs are becoming clearer. Thirteen federal agencies collaborated on the major, 1,656-page study, which outlines the grave consequences of uncontrolled climate change. […] As president, Mr Trump employs a small army of scientists and experts, who have just collectively told him what they think. His response has been to try to bury the report by releasing it during a public holiday, then scorning its findings by shrugging and saying: "I don't believe it"[18].

I don't believe it can be interpreted as a manifestation of felt truth, as opposed to the truth of fact. McIntyre writes about a "post-truth relationship to facts", which occurs "only when we are seeking to assert something that is more important to us than the truth itself" (McIntyre 2018, 13). This is a crucial observation, because it helps us understand why people make statements that "truthers" call *post-truth*: more important than these statements and their content are the deep beliefs, the values around which the persons orientate their life.

If we consider this carefully, this claim is implicit in a statement by Michael Gove that was intended by "truthers" as a clear manifestation of post-truth discourse: after refusing to mention the names of economists in favor of Brexit, he claimed that "people in this country have had enough of experts"[19]. If we take the context of this claim into account, it can be assumed that, in Gove's opinion, the statements of the experts could not affect the deep beliefs of a brexiter. Here he had activated a frame that can be found frequently among the public of those who rebel against what they consider a globalist agenda: no utilitarian evaluation can undermine strong beliefs, and these can by no means be reduced to opinions or ridiculed as "rubbish" or old-fashioned ideas. In this statement, Gove suggests that he believes that the dimension of deep values and beliefs is under attack by the "experts".

5. The public's disorientation and the distrust of the alleged "masters of discourse"

In an agency dispatch of 25 February 2019, Reuters informed the public that, according to research just published on *Nature Climate Change*, the evidence of global warming of anthropogenic origin had reached a level of certainty close to 100 percent[20].

However, *Breitbart news*, a site that is ideologically close to Donald Trump, made claims that contrasted this and earlier results of studies on climate change published in scientific journals. In this regard, *Breitbart news* highlighted the words of Patrick Moore, a co-founder of Greenpeace Canada, according to whom many scholars are hired by politicians and bureaucrats, i.e. paid with public money, to promote the narrative on the anthropogenic causes of climate change[21]. These scholars would be basically and voluntarily "hooked on government grants". They would apparently work for the interests of politicians and bureaucrats who would feed a climate of fear to control people's minds and collect their votes.

It is clear that the public feels lost when exposed to statements that claim to be indisputable and, at the same time, are opposed to news published by sources that are generally considered authoritative, as they are subject to verification protocols. The attack of the post-truthers is aimed precisely at those who establish such protocols: it insinuates that they are "fabricated" by the same authors of the statements to verify. In fact, those who have this suspicion take it for granted that information is chosen on the basis of the interests which have to be defended and imposed on the public. This argument is clearly formulated in the same article published by *Breitbart news*: "Fear has been used all through history to gain control of people's minds and wallets and all else, and the climate catastrophe is strictly a fear campaign — well, fear and guilt".

The news about climate change would arouse shame in the people, who would then try to adapt their behaviour to the task they were given by those who set the agenda of the mainstream media. The insinuation of a conspiracy is a frame that can hardly be abandoned by an audience of individuals who are alone, without points of reference and are inclined to distrust institutions and the mass media which they perceive as the henchmen of large interest groups.

Post-truthers' critics, in turn, draw attention to the "combined provisions" of agencies at the service of public and private organizations, fake news propagators, and algorithm experts – all working in various ways to reprogram the minds of a naive public. Here, too, a frame akin to the previous one seems to be activated: there are individuals out there who need to be defended from pitfalls, but, above all, there are people concerned about the concept of truth, because they see it under attack (McIntyre 2018, 9).

Perhaps a whole series of discourse move used by politicians when they address the public of their supporters should be kept out of the debate. In fact, a lot of what politicians say has little commitment to reality. In these moves, the referential function (Bühler's *Darstellungsfunktion*) is not so relevant as the emotive and the phatic functions. The last serves to increase phatic communion[22], to bind together people who share a common ground (Clark 1996). Since political campaigns exist, in the Western world at least, politicians try to persuade voters to vote for them and each instrument can be useful to this purpose. Yes, you can do things with words: reality can be brought about by means of words.

The two adverse camps seem to agree at least on the risks that are run by human coexistence when public communication is disconnected from a relationship of authentic trust. On this point it is perhaps possible to establish a minimum condition for dialogue: both sides acknowledge the absolute lack of mutual trust.

6. Facts, values and the anthropological dimension of communication

Professional manipulators are nested everywhere. It does not seem that intellectuals and scholars who use the term *post-truth* can be excluded from this group. They have been reproached for questioning the autonomy of values with respect to empirically verifiable facts, because in their view it should be obvious that facts require the change or the abandonment of deep beliefs when these are in contrast with facts. According to the rebels, the reaction of the "crowd" (i.e. the people who are considered disinformed or misinformed by critics) is directed against the "experts" and their contempt for values and beliefs[23]. Following this interpretation, the critics' attitude to absolutely and unquestionably reaffirm the primacy of empirical observations over any other form of commitment towards reality and life can contribute to exacerbate the rebellion and the rebels' mistrust of the truth principle.

Another explosive element can also be found: in public discourse, especially by journalists, experts expect to be given an authority that extends to every aspect of human life. But it should be pointed out that scientific proposals have the status of hypotheses and their validity must be constantly tested and verified. A scientific proposition is not indisputable, precisely because it requires constant verification. Science is not an ideology. And no *argumentum ex auctoritate* can be treated as a piece of science. Moreover, there is a deep dimension of the individual that cannot be treated as if it were an observable, verifiable phenomenon. It is the sphere of the convictions rooted in the human heart (*les raisons du coeur*), the values that people want to defend against what they perceive as an attempt to undermine their anthropological foundation.

Among the constituent elements of human nature there is suspicion towards those who spread "facts" that are felt to be dangerous for one's own convictions. More than just a coping strategy, the rebellion of the "public" against post-truth critics represents the refusal to grant the "experts" the right to define every aspect of human life. It is undoubtedly an over-reaction, which at times puts falsity or nonsense before facts. This attitude is, however, the consequence of the mistrust of traditional sources of information. Such distrust is often unfounded, but it exists, and denying it does not help understand the reasons of those who rebel.

Our hypothesis is that a crucial reason for this mistrust is the lack of interpersonal communication. Communication is in fact rooted in an interpersonal relation, an openness to the other individual which is constitutive of human nature. It might be useful to take into account this anthropological component which communication theories often overlook. This article considers the very foundation of communicative events, which cannot be reduced to the cognitive component: communicating is not only the exchange of information between individuals who have no interpersonal relationships and are exposed to the risk of manipulation.

7. The role of argumentation and reasonableness

Communication needs comparison of experiences and points of view. Argumentative practices play a key role in this. A fact has not escaped the attention of some observers[24]: there is no real argument in the discursive moves of the two sides considered above. Let us consider Sorin Stati's model of the argumentative roles (Stati 1990, 63–85). With this term he refers to relations that are established between two discourse moves: one of these is the "thesis", to which other moves are attached that can work for or against it. The decisive roles (the best suited to persuading or dissuading) are "justification" (an argument in favour of the thesis) and "objection" (an argument against the thesis). But there are also other roles, with low argumentative force, because they are less suitable for persuading: the "assent" is a positive role which limits itself to reaffirming a thesis without adding information, the "rectification" replaces a thesis with the opposite thesis and the "contestation" is only the negation of the thesis and manifests itself in expressions such as *No, it is not!*, *It's a fake!*, *I don't believe it*, *I don't agree* etc. The "critics" reproach and reaffirm their commitment to the facts; the "rebels" reject the facts and oppose "alternative truths".

However, these roles are understood as preliminaries or ancillary to argumentation proper. In fact, according to the pragma-dialectical approach, argumentation is

> […] a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 1).

The term *argumentation* denotes here both the process of arguing and its product. We can see that post-truth communication events as well as statements about post-truth do not exhibit a proper argumentation, neither as a process nor as a product. In fact, the subjects are not engaged in a social activity as defined above, nor are these discourse moves characterized by an argumentative structure, be it understood as the result of an activity (like in Pragma-dialectics), as a superstructure, or a global schematic structure in van Dijk's sense[25] or as text production strategies that are relevant for cognition (Heinemann and Heinemann 2002, 187; Werlich 1975)[26].

According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst, argumentation aims at convincing a "reasonable critic". This expression denotes more than a rational agent: the adjective *reasonable* indicates the anthropological dimension of reason which takes into account human experience as a whole (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, 123–134). At a deeper level, arguments are reasonable when they are related to what is good for a person (Rigotti, Rocci, and Greco 2006). Convincing has to do with the moral aspect of argumentation. But it requires also readiness and capacity to communicate and to do this trust must be given to the others.

8. Trust and relevance as a basis for communication

The discussion of the examples considered in Sections 4 and 5 relies on the assumption that the notion of post-truth does not consider trust and credit given to the speaker by the public. This is a fundamental component of human communication. *Pístis* 'trust' (with the same Ie. root of Lat. *fides* 'trust, credit') represents the very foundation of

Ancient rhetoric, which can be considered as a first theory of communication (Rigotti 1995): from this viewpoint, the communicative relationship of giving credit involves the communicating person as a whole, even in the affective dimension (*pathos*). Trust is the core of communication as the fabric of human coexistence. What is convincing is the truth that responds benevolently to a desire of the heart (Rigotti, Rocci, and Greco 2006). In order to meet the requirements that are set by this notion of truth, a claim to "facts" is not enough. The relationship to what is good for the subject should be convincingly communicated.

8.1. Back to the classical tradition: communication as exchange of a good

An act of speech communication can be understood as the exchange of a "good", which is made up of signs (Rigotti and Cigada 2013, 1–3). This is how the Classical tradition conceptualized communication: the Latin verb *communicare* has the root of *munus* 'good, valuable thing': signs are precious objects that people create and share. The Latin word *communicatio* is etymologically related to *communis* and *communion*: Classical tradition was aware that communication is needed to establish a community.

In a communicative event an exchange of signs takes place so that "meaning" is produced. Meaning is conceived here in a pragmatic perspective: it does not correspond to "what words mean". Cognitive linguistics has pointed out that a "container" metaphor is at work when we speak about words having a content (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 10–12). A similar metaphor can be found when the pragmatic organization of information is conceived of in terms of information *packaging* (Chafe 1976, 25–56). From this viewpoint, there are various ways to present (*wrap up*) the propositional content, and they belong to the pragmatic domain. In this paper, however, the term *pragmatic* is understood in the narrower sense of Speech-Act theory: speech communication is viewed as an action and the structure of the text is represented as a complex action, which consists of acts corresponding to the sequences that make up the text (Rigotti 1993, 43–148). As Lakoff and Johnson point out, the container metaphor obscures meaning; analogously, the packaging metaphor obscures the pragmatic dimension of text, which is made up of actions and interpersonal relations.

Meaning is related to a "world". A "world" related to a text is taken here as an experience-based dynamic model of reality that enables humans to understand what is going on within a communicative act. Such a model comprises facts and assumptions, values and beliefs, and it is constantly developed, rectified and integrated according to new additional experience. According to this viewpoint, meaning is rooted in the interlocutors' experience and is relevant for the addressee. There are various dimensions of relevance for the persons involved in communication, according to the impact a text can have on their life.

Relevance is understood here in a broader sense than the propositional cognitive processing suggested by the Relevance-theory account: according to this model, relevance is described in terms of processing effort and contextual effects, i.e. a change in the cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 60–62). Nevertheless, it is recognized that a change in the mutual cognitive environment has pragmatic consequences, because it also represents a change in the possibilities of interaction and further

communication. Another element that cannot be reduced to the cognitive domain, because it should be treated as an interpersonal (anthropological) component, is the hearer's expectation, which can be related to the speaker's promise to give relevant information.

In general, a text must be "interesting" for an addressed person: the proper sense of the Latin verb *interesse* was 'to be in the midst, to be involved' in something. Peter Strawson observed that

> […] Stating is not a gratuitous and random human activity. We do not, except in social desperation, direct isolated and unconnected pieces of information to each other, but on the contrary intend to give or add information about what is a matter of standing current interest or concern (Strawson 1964, 97).

Interest includes experiential and affective dimensions and is tightly connected to consciousness and the self (Rigotti 2005a, 80). A purely informative text would be difficult to imagine in real life communication. A text must always present itself as existentially relevant for the recipient. In a way, small talk and gossip are the linguistic activities that apparently come closest to the ideal of the purely informative function, at least until their (multiple) hidden social functions are considered (Rigotti and Rocci 2006).

But the same seems to hold for a lot of information that is of little interest to the addressee. The speaker too can sometimes present a given content without an apparent commitment to its validity. This often occurs in so-called small talk, where conversation has a phatic function, in that it serves to establish, to maintain or to reinforce phatic communion (Holmes 2000: 32–61).

These speech events are characterized by the interlocutors' need to cultivate and maintain personal relationships. These bonds are also strengthened by the sharing of beliefs, values, reasons for living. When Donald Trump makes false or approximate statements, it is likely that he knows and that his followers will also know. But this is not considered important by the addressees. The referential function, the act of denotation, is secondary. In the foreground is phatic communion, which is not affected by the criticism of the truthers.

8.2. Considering the role of culture, community and common ground

To understand this anthropologically crucial dimension of communication events, the relationship between culture, community and common ground must be accounted for. Let us consider the word *culture* first. Two basic meanings in this term can be distinguished: *culture* as a system, and *culture* as a family of texts (Rigotti 2005b, Rigotti and Cigada 2013, 3–7). Both meanings can be traced back to the similarity (but it is not a cognitive metaphor) between a culture and a structure of reception: culture welcomes humans on the one hand by teaching them the details of reality and it provides them with its categories, by teaching them how to relate to reality (Rigotti 2005b, 309).

Corresponding to the two basic meanings of *culture*, two perspectives on communities can be considered (Tardini 2003): a community can be seen as a set of persons who have something in common, i.e. who share a culture as a system, or as a group of persons who communicate and share common texts, i.e. who share a culture as a hypertext. In the former perspective "paradigmatic communities" are identified, whose

members are characterized by similarity, as their members share similar values and beliefs. The Catholic Church can represent a large paradigmatic community because its members subscribe to the *Credo*. People sharing a language are also members of a paradigmatic community. In the latter perspective "syntagmatic communities" are identified, whose members are characterized by differences, as the interactions between them produce elements that carry out different and complementary functions. Examples of syntagmatic communities are communities of practice such as a family having dinner, a group of friends playing cards together, and so on.

These two configurations of communities are also characterized by different levels of the *common ground* that is shared among communicating persons. The members of a syntagmatic community share not only the *communal* common ground (the knowledge that is shared in a paradigmatic community), but also a *personal* common ground. The latter is rooted in the interactional experience among the members (Clark 1996, 100). Syntagmatic communities are existing communities of people who are engaged in joint activities.

Personal common ground is related to both the cognitive and the anthropological dimensions of communication. In cognitive accounts of discourse, common ground is elaborated and enriched as the speech event goes on. A dynamic semantics account of text understanding is adopted in which text interpretation is a process and the meaning of the expressions used in text represent their contribution to a change in the informational state of the addressee (Wüest 2011, 26–30).

In a discourse move, a piece of content can be accommodated by the speaker without a specific statement or a commitment about its truthfulness. This corresponds to what goes on typically in everyday conversation. Lauri Karttunen has pointed out that

> People […] make leaps and shortcuts by using sentences whose presuppositions are not satisfied in the conversational context. This is the rule rather than the exception […] If the current conversational context does not suffice, the listener is entitled and expected to extend it as required. (Karttunen 1974, 191)

The addressees accept such "leaps and shortcuts" because they give credit to the speaker. Mutual trust is required to bring about a cognitive change in the informational state: the cognitive component cannot be treated separately from the anthropological dimension. In fact, meaning does not consist only in a change in the individual cognitive environment. It can give rise also to a *habit change*. The word *habit* comes from Lat. *habitus* and refers to a deep change of the persons involved in communication (Rigotti and Cigada 2013, 58). Their habit change indicates that the "good", i.e. the meaning shared in a speech event has been highly interesting for them.

9. Concluding remarks. Taking communication seriously

Those who coined the word *post-truth* carried out an ideological activity: they introduced a word that created a piece of reality. More precisely, they reduced reality to their interpretation. They occupied the field of discourse and won: their own vision of the observed communicative phenomenon established the frame within which the discourse was then oriented.

As in ideological discourse, what characterizes an area of discourse - in our case, political propaganda - is extended to areas of discourse that express the professions of faith or the deep beliefs of a person. Then comes the rebellion of those who see what they firmly believe in threatened. We have seen that beliefs play a major role in communication, even in what has been labeled as *post-truth*. Beliefs are often related to cognitive framing, as framing selects facts that correspond to our beliefs and tend to dismiss those that are not (Lakoff 2004). We have assumed that certain deep beliefs are not determined by framing. These beliefs are reasonable, i.e. they can show the arguments on which they are grounded (Rigotti 2005a, 76). To explain their reasonability, genuine argumentation is needed. But this requires a commitment to real communication, in which the subjects respond to real needs and interact to achieve goals. In many cases, the subjects' interest is to favor the introduction of new beliefs into the common ground of a given community, so that these beliefs become part of the culture that guides human behaviour within that community. The discourse in the public sphere reflects this tendency towards a cultural change.

We can assume that a communicative act is genuine when the persons are open to change their habit. A belief change is possible with genuine communicative acts, which rely on mutual trust and willingness to understand other people's interest and needs, to help them achieve the goals that are related to a common good.

Post-truth claims are not genuine communicative events, and the same can be assumed for most of the critics' reactions to the spread of this form of manipulation. In fact, both parties seem unwilling to engage in serious argumentation, probably because they are afraid they should be willing to change their frame of mind. Do mutual distrust, the suspicion towards facts and the contempt towards reasonable beliefs hint at the phasing-out of the anthropological component of communication?

Or, maybe, in the Western world communication suffers because of the ideological pressure of those who claim to have the exclusivity of public space? Contempt for beliefs shifts towards contempt for people who have these beliefs. The way is open to the denial of a fundamental right of the human person.

I care the right to see that the core of beliefs and values that guide the human heart is guarded and respected. I believe that the post-truth frame shows a reductionist approach incapable of conceiving communication as a foundational component of human nature and as an activity capable of creating community relations.

The rebellion against the frame of post-truth shows that men of good will are tired of the ideological forcing that makes them loose the desire to communicate genuinely, with a benevolent disposition towards others in the dialogue exchange.

Notes

1. On Priscianus' theory of nouns cf. Cigada 1999, 145–150; Rigotti and Cigada 2013, 195–204.
2. As for its etymology, world comes from werold 'the age of man', which is composed of wer 'man, homo' and ald 'age': it is a loan translation of the Latin word saeculum. The meanings of these words are conceptualized in relation to the duration of human life: 'world' is not seen in terms of the physical world.
3. Thom's statement refers to Soviet language. It seems to hold in general for some aspects of public discourse everywhere…

4. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post-racial> (accessed 20 February 2019).

5. "This above all: to thine own self be true/And it must follow, as the night the day/Thou canst not then be false to any man./Farewell, my blessing season this in thee" (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3, 78–82; see Shakespeare 1988, 659).

6. Quoted by Maks Fasmer [Max Vasmer], who considered this etymology as the most convincing; cf. Fasmer 1986, 144.

7. An excellent presentation of this topic is given by Gebert 2006, 217–243.

8. Walter Porzig introduced this notion (verblasste Metapher: cf. Porzig 1934, 70–97).

9. Denotation should be distinguished from reference: the former is related to potential lexical meanings of words taken in isolation, as members of a paradigm, while the latter is a property of words as they are used in utterance phrases, as parts of a discourse. Cf. Lyons 1977, 174–229.

10. We refer here to the distinction between "emic" and "etic" that characterizes anthropological-cultural research and can be traced back to the works of Kenneth Pike. Cf. Kottak 2006.

11. "[…] il postmoderno… è convinto che le sue verità alternative siano verità assolute […]" (Ferraris 2017, 42).

12. "[…] i posttruisti affermano che il modo migliore per affermare la propria verità è dare del bugiardo al prossimo" (Ferraris 2017, 42).

13. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016> (accessed 15 February 2019), where the recent history of the word is expoounded. Here the noun post-truth is called "an adjective", meaning that it occurs as a modifier of nouns.

14. "[…] postfaktisch […] verweist darauf, dass es in politischen und gesellschaftlichen Diskussionen heute zunehmend um Emotionen anstelle von Fakten geht" (<https://gfds.de/wort-des-jahres-2016>, accessed 2 January 2019). This definition is commented on by Jochen Bär, who notes that this compound may seem strange at first glance, since, translated literally from Latin, it means 'after-factual' or 'after, behind the facts'. Given this meaning, one could expect a word such as counterfactual ('contradicting the facts, opposite') or also, in a mixture of Greek and Latin, antifactual. But, as in postmodernism or poststructuralism, it is based on the idea of a new era ("Die Wortbildung postfaktisch könnte auf den ersten Blick befremdlich erscheinen, da sie, vom Lateinischen wörtlich übersetzt, ›nach-faktisch‹ oder ›nach, hinter den Fakten‹ bedeutet. Eher erwarten könnte man bei der angegebenen Bedeutung des Wortes eine Bildung wie kontrafaktisch (›den Fakten widersprechend, entgegengesetzt‹) oder auch, in griechisch-lateinischer Sprachmischung, antifaktisch. Zugrunde liegt aber, ähnlich wie bei Postmoderne oder Poststrukturalismus, die Vorstellung einer neuen Epoche […]": cf. Bär 2016).

15. "[…] Argomentazione, caratterizzata da un forte appello all'emotività, ma che basandosi su credenze diffuse e non su fatti verificati tende a essere accettata come veritiera, influenzando l'opinione pubblica" (quoted by Ferraris 2017, 163, note 10).

16. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/12/post-truth-worst-of-best-donald-trump-sean-spicer-kellyanne-conway> (accessed 20 February 2019).

17. <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c> June 3, 2016 (accessed 10 February 2019).

18. <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/climate-change-denial-is-just-the-latest-example-of-trump-s-post-truth-presidency-1.798696> Dec. 3, 2018 (accessed 10 February 2019).

19. <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c> June 3, 2016 (accessed 10 February 2019).

20. "Evidence for man-made global warming has reached a "gold standard" level of certainty, adding pressure for cuts in greenhouse gases to limit rising temperatures, scientists said on Monday" (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climatechange-temperatures/evidence-for-man-made-global-warming-hits-gold-standard-scientists> (accessed 1 March 2019).

21. "Scientists are co-opted and corrupted by politicians and bureaucracies invested in advancing the narrative of "climate change" in order to further centralize political power

and control" in <https://www.breitbart.com/radio/2019/03/07> (accessed 10 March 2019).

22. "[…] phatic communion brings savage and civilized alike into the pleasant atmosphere of polite, social intercourse" (Malinowski 2006, 298).

23. For all, cf. <https://georgegillett.com/2017/04/20/the-myth-of-post-truth-politics> (accessed 10 March 2019).

24. Daniel von Wachter – a philosopher who is at the head of the "Internationale Akademie für Philosophie" in the Principality of Liechtenstein – has published online an interesting comment (in German) on how post-truth works: cf. <http://www.professorenforum.de/uploads/tx_news/Wie_funktioniert__postfaktisch_22_.pdf> (accessed 10 January 2019).

25. "[…] superstructure is the schematic form that organizes the global meaning of a text" (van Dijk 1980, 108). Van Dijk treats argumentation as a "well-known conventional superstructure, where we have categories like 'premises' and 'conclusion'", but these categories are taken as "forms that may be filled with different meanings. We see, however, that such forms put certain constraints on the meaning content: Not any conclusion may follow any premises but only those propositions entailed by a sequence of others" (van Dijk 1980, p. 109).

26. For Egon Werlich, narration, description and argumentation are often assumed to reflect different cognitive processes of understanding and organizing experience ("[…] so scheint einiges für die generelle Hypothese zu sprechen, dass Texttypen […] auch mit angeborenen Kategorisierungsprozessen der menschlichen Erkenntnis bzw. des menschlichen Denkens [korrelieren]": cf. Werlich 1975, 40).

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Giovanni Gobber studied German and Russian at the Catholic University of Milan, where he received his MA degree in General linguistics. 1988 he became Assistant Professor and 2000 was appointed a full professor of General linguistics in the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures. Since then he has held courses in Historical Linguistics, General Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and German Linguistics.

He has taught in several Universities in Italy (Trento, Piemonte Orientale, Valle d'Aosta) and abroad (Novosibirsk, Łódź, Piliscsaba [Hungary]). Among his scientific appointments, he is co-Editor of the scientific journal "L'analisi linguistica e letteraria". He is co-Editor of the book series "Languages and cultures/Langues et cultures/Lingue e culture" (LED, Milano). He is member of the Scientific Board of two journals: "Translatorica & Translata" (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego) and "Nuova Secondaria". He is member of the Scientific board of two Italian book series: "Linguistica e Traduzione" (Liberiauniversitaria editrice, Padova) and "Studies in European Linguistics" (Sapienza Università Editrice). In 2006–2008 he has been the Principal Investigator of a University Research Project that was co-funded by the Italian Ministry of Education and Universities. Between 2004 and 2010 he was director of the Teacher Training Courses at the Università Cattolica and worked with the State Educational Authority at several projects on applied linguistics and language teaching. In November 2014 he was elected the Dean of the Faculty of Linguistic Sciences and Foreign Literatures at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. In November 2018 he has been re-elected and will remain in charge until October 2022.

He did his first research in theoretical linguistics, where he studied the development of formal syntax in theoretical linguistics and the origins of categorial grammar in the logical thinking

of German and Polish philosophers and logicians (Husserl, Leśniewski, Ajdukiewicz). Then he devoted himself to text linguistics and pragmatics, where he investigated the use of questions in Germanic, Baltic and Slavic languages. In his recent linguistic research he has adopted a comparative functional approach in the study of language phenomena. He is also interested in applied linguistics, with particular attention to Argumentation in context.

Among his publications are the following monographs:

La sintassi fra struttura e funzione, Brescia 1992; *Pragmatica delle frasi interrogative*, Milano 1999; *Argomenti di linguistica*, Milano 2003; (with Moreno Morani), *Linguistica generale*, Milano 2010, second edition 2014; *Strutture morfolessicali e usi preferenziali dei sintagmi interrogativi in tedesco, polacco e russo. Per un'analisi comparata*, Milano 2014; *Vom Wunder des Wandels*, Milano 2016; *Lingue, culture ed esperienza*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2018, 102 pp.

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