

# Content and sense<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In this paper we position ourselves against idealist presuppositions so frequent in the humanities and social sciences, and, particularly, in communication theory. We argue that a realist approach to the study of communication avoiding such implausible assumptions is not only possible, but has already been exemplified in proposals that take communication to be a phenomenon with a biological origin. We argue that this sort of perspective can account for the variety of communicative functions we encounter in human experience, including the ones involving senses.*

## Keywords

Idealism  
realism  
communication  
sense  
truth

One of the most frequently discussed issues in communication theory concerns the nature of communication, and even, beyond that, whether there is a unique phenomenon behind this label. A common view on the subject commits to the idea that communication involves the transmission of content between interlocutors. Some authors refer to this perspective as 'the transmission view' of communication.<sup>2</sup> One of the problems usually associated with this view concerns the notion of content. What are contents? How should we account for them? In this paper we will elaborate this notion and will discuss the shortcomings that have traditionally been attributed to it. We will distinguish two aspects to these deficiencies: a semantic one, concerning the nature of these objects of our thoughts and statements and their role in explaining cognitive significance, and an ontological one, concerning the relation between contents and reality. We will finally suggest a possible realist approach for solving some of these deficiencies.

There is, however, another possible family of approaches to the issue of the nature of communication, which actually seem to be quite popular in the area of communication theory: for instance, to consider that any theory we might build on the nature of communication will not be anything but another narration (Carey 1989), to which we are not entitled to attribute any better claim to truth than to any other, or that any theory of communication is equally acceptable in principle, independently of its epistemological and ontological presuppositions (Craig 1999). In this paper we position ourselves against this sort of idealist perspective, and propose that a realist empirical approach should be applied to the topic. We think that whether there is a phenomenon we could be entitled to call 'communication' or not, we will

1. We would like to thank Dr Johan Siebers for his support, insightful comments and help with the language. This essay has been financed, in part, through grant FFI2008-06164-C02-02 of the Spanish *Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación*.
2. The 'transmission view' can be traced back as far as Locke, and has gained support with its manifestations through Shannon and Weaver's theory of information (1963), psychological functionalism, the computational analogy for computational processes and cybernetics. The basic elements of communication, according to this view, include a broadcasting agent with a message

to transmit to a receptor in order to affect the receptor's behavioural dispositions. The message is codified and transmitted through a channel decoded by the receptor, who thus obtains the encoded message, meaning or content, or a more or less approximate replica of it.

only know through the conjecturing of hypotheses that are maximally coherent with the evidence we possess.

In fact, we think that a great amount of work has already been done, within this realist approach, in the direction of considering communication to be a phenomenon with a biological origin. This research has produced interesting proposals on the nature of representation, content, truth, and other concepts, which seem to be a first step towards building a reasonable idea of communication. We hope we can, with this paper, contribute to this line of thought. We are, thus, assuming a realist perspective on the issue that goes directly against fashionable contemporary constructivist, relativist, perspectivist and postmodernist forms of addressing communication theory. We do so because we abide by the commonsensical realist assumption that there is a transcendent knowable reality, against the presupposition of all the mentioned views that reality is a construction of the subject. We find that this presupposition lacks solid foundations. It goes against common sense, against all that is supposed by our ordinary behaviour, and against the working assumptions of scientific activity. Moreover, we find the arguments used to defend the varieties of idealism are of a poor quality, and that idealism, as a general metaphysical model, cannot compete with realism at the level of simplicity and compatibility with all available evidence. We think that revisions of common sense judgments require a great deal of empirically justified theoretical support, and that weak philosophical arguments should never prompt such amendments (in contrast to what seems to have been a trademark of most philosophical thought). In this article, we will reflect on the antecedents and arguments of contemporary idealist positions, and try to point out their difficulties.

In our work we will follow a strategy (common to a number of situations of theoretical work) in which the starting point is a commonly used ambiguous expression (such as 'communication', 'truth', 'meaning', 'knowledge', etc.). The first job of the theoretician in such cases is to select one of the diverse uses of the expression for its promise as a theoretical term, and refine the common use, so as to make it as precise and coherent with available evidence as possible, even if this sometimes ends up implying a certain separation from common sense, using a methodology that we find related to Rawls' 'reflective equilibrium' (Rawls 1971).

## **The functions of communication**

Common sense tells us that, contrary to what some semioticians believe, mere causal relations do not warrant the existence of communication. Things that serve as vehicles of communication are oftentimes called 'signals'. There is, however, a variety of phenomena that are sometimes said to involve signals but are not thought to constitute instances of communication (Dretske 1981). Though they may be classified under the label 'signal', mere causally linked natural phenomena are not usually thought to be involved in communicative phenomena. Thus, to use a pair of the most exploited examples, certain cloud formations are often said to be signals of rain, and smoke is usually

taken to be a signal of combustion. What precludes us from talking of communication in cases such as these?

It seems clear that a central reason is the lack of communicative agents. Clouds or fire are not broadcasting agents. Much of current research on the issue takes this point for granted. For instance, it is Ruth Millikan's general thesis (Millikan 1984) that communication is, originally, a biological phenomenon: something that started off with living beings, and that, though it might be thought to happen also in the case of some artificial products of these beings, cannot be attributed to pre-biological entities.

As for the functions of communication, Millikan seems to think of two basic ones that are satisfied by all the creatures able to communicate: the transmission of information and the request for action. To resort to the classical example, bees are able to convey information on the location of nectar sources to their beehive companions through bee dances, which serve also to express instructions requiring them to reach the mentioned sources. For both of these functions, we find that 'representations' can be associated with conditions concerning the world: truth conditions in the case of information transmission, and satisfaction conditions in the case of requests for action. The link between representations and these conditions in these kinds of languages has a natural origin; this is due not, of course, to any sort of resemblance between representation and represented fact, but because it has been fixed through adaptive mechanisms, not through any kind of conventional agreement among the agents involved.

On the other hand, it seems clear that, for a lot of living creatures, the sort of internal states that serve as the basis for communication are not satisfactorily described as intentions, beliefs, opinions, etc. We would not ordinarily say that bees have intentions, much less bacteria or the organs of living creatures. According to Millikan's account, however, all of these entities are able to occupy different internal representational states, associated to truth and satisfaction conditions, which may serve as a basis for communication. Maybe this would be one of the areas in which common sense intuitions have to be revised.

The human capacity to communicate through language certainly has a natural origin. Which functions human languages were created to fulfil will surely have to be conjectured by empirical scientists studying the origins of the species. In any case, transmission of information and requests for action are most clearly among the basic functions these languages fulfil. In particular, communication has been traditionally understood as a form of exchange of opinions, beliefs, knowledge, information, etc. The language we use serves, among other things, to express what we think in ways that allow others to understand it and act accordingly. It seems then that, in an instance of communication, there is something that is transmitted. One of the terms that are commonly used to name this supposedly transmitted thing is 'content'. Our thoughts have content that we can convey through language to others. This is achieved through the production of statements, which are the minimum linguistic actions that allow for the transmission of informational content. Statements have to be understood by the

3. The selection of information is not a neutral process, and this often alters the objectivity of the information transmitted. Failure may happen, then, when information is selected according to biased criteria. Many mass communication theories, including some abiding by a realist perspective, have taken into account this fact. Thus the 'Gate-keeping' theory, or the 'Agenda-setting' theory, emphasize that mass media select information guided by their own purposes. Of course, one can always argue that the information to convey in a story always needs to be previously selected. Not every detail can be explained. What needs to be clearly established, then, is which criteria are used on each occasion, and which are relevant in each context.
4. In fact, the transmission view of communication is sometimes presented as opposed to the 'ritual view' (Carey 1989, van Zoonen 1994, Radford 2005), which emphasizes the role in reinforcing community adscription of communication. According to this latter perspective, storytelling is one of the basic functions of communication, both in its factual and fictional varieties.

listeners if the communication act is to be achieved successfully. This understanding is based on the grasping, by the listeners, of the content of the statement. A similar description can be given in the case of orders, commands, etc.

Although transmission of information and request for action seem clear cases of functions that fall under the idea of communication, it seems obvious that they are not the only purposes communication may serve. Language can be used for a wide variety of activities: begging, asking, praising, insulting, playing, moving, expressing emotions, entertaining, etc. Most of these actions require the use of complete statements (or their equivalent), which are supposed to express contents. There are linguistic actions, however, that lack truth or satisfaction conditions. Think, for instance, of fictive storytelling, etc.

Of course, narration has two varieties: fact and fiction. News would fall under the first category. But there is a further dimension to truth-conditions in the case of factual narrations. A piece of news may be true in each of its constituent statements, but it may also offer a misleading account of the situation it is supposed to reflect. That this is so shows that factual storytelling is functionally different from the mere passing of information. Bees pass information but do not narrate. It is clear that, in this latter case, context plays an important role in determining the issues that have to be addressed by the narrator to produce a pertinent story.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, the truth conditional aspect of both the passing of information as well as narrative fact seems susceptible to an account in terms of the transmission view of communication. Fiction, on the other hand, seems a bit more complicated to tackle from this perspective.<sup>4</sup> We certainly cannot talk of truth-conditions in this case. So, provided that there is content to fiction, we will have to explain it otherwise. It seems clear also that a different aspect of meaning, 'sense', will have to play an important role in this explanation. Furthermore, and aside from the issue of fiction, there are several well-known shortcomings to explanations of content in terms of truth-conditions. Let us now turn to examine some of these shortcomings, as well as the general strategy designed to solve them.

## Senses

What is transmitted through communicative acts? What is stored and conveyed by means of our thoughts and statements? A first obvious candidate is facts: with our words we speak about the things that happen, the events to which we have access. So why not take these facts as the contents of our thoughts and statements? This option is easily ruled out once we realize that we can think about and talk about things that have not happened and will never happen. I can say 'I ate meat today', or think it, but this thought, as well as the corresponding statement, cannot have as content the fact that I ate meat today because there is no such fact.

The obvious alternative to facts is proposed, for instance, under different guises, by authors such as the early Frege of the *Begriffsschrift* (1879) or the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922): if

facts cannot do the job, possible facts, possible states of affairs, judgeable contents (in Frege's terminology) or truth conditions, if you want, will possibly do (Barwise and Perry 1992). After all, I might have eaten meat today. I actually did not, and so the condition that I ate it is not satisfied by the world. But that does not affect the condition itself. It affects its satisfaction. So maybe contents are truth-conditions, except that, as we have just seen in the previous section, they cannot account for fictional discourse. What other problems affect this proposal?

An obvious one is that utterances and thoughts can concern entities that do not exist. My daughter believes that Santa came last night, even though not only it is the case that this fact has not occurred, but also that Santa does not exist. Thus, I can not only build false phrases, which cannot refer to facts, but I can use non-referring names as well, in situations in which it seems reasonable to say that there is transmission of content, and in which communication occurs.

There is, at least, still a third reason that shows to us that we cannot identify content with facts or truth-conditions. The statements 'Dragan Dabic was in Belgrade all through 2007' and 'Radovan Karadzic was in Belgrade all through 2007' seem to say clearly different things (and thus have different meanings). And yet they might happen to correspond to precisely the same fact.

Problems analogous to these (known in the philosophy of language, under the general heading: 'the problem of intentionality') have led many authors to think, since the beginning of philosophical reflection on issues of language and mind, that the content and meaning of our intentional acts (thoughts, uttered language, etc.), could neither be explained in terms of facts, nor of conditions built up of worldly constituents. The alternative proposed from the outset has been, of course, the claim that the said contents are abstract entities of a special nature, in a move very frequent in philosophy (and denounced with scorn by the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), that we may label 'solution by reification'.

These special entities (in philosophical terms, 'intensions') that would serve to explain what it is that we mean when we communicate, have adopted different guises through the history of semantics, from the stoics' *lekta* to the logical atomists' 'sense data', passing through the impressions and ideas of the British empiricists or Frege's senses. In general, however, they have been thought of as abstract entities, that is, things not located anywhere in space, to which we have access through special intellectual capacities. Frege (1892), for instance, spoke of our ability to 'grasp' senses, and Locke's ideas are supposedly present directly to the mind.

How would intensions solve the problems of intentionality? If we focus on the Fregean version of these entities, senses are entities we have access to when we understand a statement or think a thought. They are thought of as modes of presentation of real things, but can, however, present non-existing things (i.e., present nothing). And, of course, one real entity can be presented under different guises on different occasions. So, for instance, Radovan Karadzic could be presented

5. For a fuller account of this point, see Putnam (1975).

as the self-proclaimed founder of the Republika Srpska, or as the naturalist healer reachable, for a while, at [healingwounds@dragandabic.com](mailto:healingwounds@dragandabic.com) (as well as in many other ways, of course). The expression 'Dragan Dabic', used in a statement on Radovan Karadzic, would present this person under the latter guise, and we would not need to know that it corresponds to the self-proclaimed founder of the Republika Srpska. This fact would explain the informative character of the statement 'Dragan Dabic is Radovan Karadzic,' which 'Radovan Karadzic is Radovan Karadzic' would lack, despite the fact that both statements concern the same person.

We also said that senses can 'present' non-existing entities. Thus, while 'Santa came last night' cannot correspond to any fact, since Santa does not exist, it is a statement that can alter the cognitive attitude of listeners, which is especially obvious in the case of people who believe in Santa's existence or ignore his inexistence. The sense of the term 'Santa' would serve, in cases like these, to explain the change in dispositions to action, as a consequence of the understanding of that statement, of such people. The statement can then be attributed a content, or said to have a meaning that has been understood.

Although the postulation of such entities as senses is supposed to solve the problems of intentionality, it generates many hard to face difficulties. Thus, on the one hand, senses fail to satisfy some of the roles traditionally associated with intensional entities. For instance, as direct reference theorists such as Saul Kripke (1980) or Hilary Putnam (1975) have shown, senses need not determine the reference of the corresponding expressions. On the other hand, the idea that senses correspond to meanings cannot be maintained, since the latter are usually thought to be shared to an extent that the former clearly do not attain: cows may be 'presented' to some people as sacred mammals, while others may conceive them basically as milk producers, so neither the sense 'sacred mammal' nor 'milk producer' can be thought to be the meaning (or part of the meaning)<sup>5</sup> of 'cow', as they need not be shared among competent users of this expression.

Moreover, apart from the question of the existence of a universe of intensions, located out of the physical world, and the associated problem of our access to it, there is the issue of the relationship of these intensions with the real world. If a function of language is the transmission of information about reality, what is the role played by intensions in this phenomenon? If the contents of our thoughts and assertions are built up from abstract non-worldly entities, why should we think that they can be used by us to obtain knowledge about the real world? If these intensional entities are representations of the real world, what assures us that they are reliable? More generally, if they are representations, do not the problems of intentionality affect them as well? Are they not fallible? When they fail, what is their content? And when they do not fail? And if they are not representations, but only the contents of representations, does that not mean that, when we communicate, we are not really talking about reality, but only about these intensions?

## Knowledge and certainty

Intensions are related to a well-known philosophical tradition that emerged as a response to the sceptical attitudes stemming from Cartesian epistemology. This tradition would maintain that, when we communicate, we are not talking about an external world independent of us that we could not know, but that the content of our representations, the reality we in fact know, is a product, at least in part, of the conceptual architecture of our minds. The things we see and know are not objective entities, independent of us as subjects.

As we said, we think that this philosophical tradition of 'idealism' originates as a consequence of a failed epistemology (Cartesian theory of knowledge) that ties knowledge to 'certainty'. According to this epistemology, which has been at the centre of philosophical speculation from Descartes to logical positivism (so that we can label it as 'classical epistemology'), an individual can only be sure of what presents itself directly before his mind (to use the metaphorical rhetoric habitual for this sort of philosophical approach) in a non-mediated way. Mediation is usually thought to lead to fallibility<sup>6</sup> (as many sceptical arguments have emphasized)<sup>7</sup> and fallibility, in turn, to uncertainty; therefore, only what the subject directly apprehends can be known. But our mind cannot 'grasp' directly objects in the world. Therefore, if there is something to be known, it cannot belong in the 'external' world. Any discipline that presupposes the opposite can only be a fraud (and, in particular, this would be the case for empirical science). The lack of certainty resulting from this mediated character determines that knowledge of the world would be impossible, and thus leads to scepticism.

What can be then known? Instead of revising the principles of an epistemology that leads to such untenable consequences, philosophers launched into the search for knowledge objects acceptable from this Cartesian point of view, providing us with a long list of creations: 'ideas', 'impressions', 'phenomena', 'sense data', 'qualia', 'constructs', etc. As for the external world, and given the impossibility of knowing it, it disappeared from much of the philosophical scenery as redundant: the only world we can know is the product of our cognitive activity. It is this idea of redundancy of the real world and the inseparability between the subject and known object that lies behind the epistemological discourses that underlie contemporary idealist perspectives, so frequent in certain approaches to the social sciences.

As for communication, of course, an explanation of it is hampered by the idea that we can only know what is presented to our minds directly, as it does not seem that it should also be graspable by the minds of others. This is the case for Locke's ideas, which are supposed, by this author, to play the role of meanings of words, but, at the same time, are entities particular to each subject. A variant of this sort of problem will lead to peculiar proposals such as Leibniz's 'pre-established harmony'. An alternative to this kind of explanation would lead to the postulation of entities of the family of Fregean senses, whose shortcomings we have commented on in the previous section.

6. We are not saying that epistemological models that allow for both mediation and certainty are impossible, but only trying to reflect a line of thought that leads from Cartesian epistemology to idealism.
7. Think, for instance, of Kant's (1781, 1783) point that we cannot know things in themselves, since we always know through the determinations of our mind (scorned by David Stove (1991), who dubs it 'the jewel'), or Rorty's (1979) and Putnam's (1981) versions of it, emphasizing that we could not know reality, as there is no way of comparing it with our representations of it. We will, later in this same section, comment on this sort of argument in more detail.

8. We would like to thank our student, Mariana Font Geninazzi, for the example. We believe it illustrates very clearly the intuition behind contemporary idealist positions.

9. In fact, it is almost exclusively in the idealist-constructivist camp that the idea that knowledge requires certainty continues to be maintained as the engine for the founding sceptical arguments mentioned before.

As a matter of fact, the support for classical epistemology has lost its force in the present century. On the one hand, the 'phagocytic' model of knowledge as direct apprehension of the object by the subject has given way to the acceptance of the idea that knowledge is always mediated through some form of representation. Knowledge is a form of belief, and so, a form of representation, and not any variety of 'community' between object and subject.

Concerning this phagocytic model, recall that the most frequent argument in favour of idealism, the one caricatured as 'the jewel' by David Stove (1991), affirms that one cannot know a supposed reality that is transcendent to the subject because knowledge of this reality would always be mediated by the conceptual repertoire of that subject: things 'in themselves' cannot be known. The argument does not follow, of course, as evidenced by the existence of coherent models in which a reality independent of the subject is precisely known through the use of a specific conceptual repertoire (such as so-called 'representationalist' models). In these models, of course, concepts are not what constitutes the object of knowledge, but are 'vehicles' for the representation of reality. For example, people from different cultures can observe the same object and interpret it in different ways: say as firewood or as chopsticks.<sup>8</sup> But, of course, the fact that those different persons derive different conclusions from their observations does not imply that these remarks are not about the same entity, or even that some of them should be wrong.

On the other hand, the requirement for certainty has vanished from contemporary relevant proposals on the nature of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Without this requirement, the possibility of knowledge of an objective structured external world becomes, again, the reasonable option. Thus, although the quest for certainty has undoubtedly been at the centre of philosophical work on epistemology for a long time, we believe it is now part of the most reasonable overall epistemological view that certainty, in a Cartesian sense, is not possible. Mainly because our basic (and possibly unique) source of knowledge (i.e., the empirical understanding of the world) is, because of its methodology, only capable of producing conjectures with more or less empirical support, but never definitive truths. The acceptance of certainty as a condition for knowledge leads to the denial of the possibility of knowledge of the world – a position too implausible to be taken seriously today (even if it has been taken seriously for so many centuries of failed epistemology).

It should finally be emphasized that the representationalist models mentioned in the preceding paragraph accept the fallible nature of our representations of reality, as well as their lack of neutrality or objectivity, which does not preclude the possibility of knowledge of this reality: we may err in our attempts to represent the world, but we are not conditioned to necessarily do so, and if we are successful, we may be said to know, just as a dog may be said to know where a bone is buried. If, moreover, we take into consideration the evolutionary presuppositions on which these representationalist models are based, the package offers a consistency with the results of empirical science that relegates idealist proposals to surplus speculation.

## Contemporary idealism

In spite of all this, and as we mentioned earlier, contemporary idealist attitudes continue to thrive in some areas of the human and social sciences. Let us mention a couple of further ingredients to these attitudes. One of them originates, at least in part, in the group of authors of Kantian inspiration known under the label of 'German linguistic turn' (Hamann, Herder, Humboldt), who emphasize the central role of language in shaping the reality that we know and understand. For them, Kant's phenomenal reality ceases to be the result of the action of the categories of the understanding of a pure reason common to all human subjects. Rather, human reason is never 'pure', but socially, culturally and linguistically contaminated. Each culture will build its own world (incommensurable with the realities of the rest of cultures) and, consequently, its own variety of truth. Thus, with this linguistic turn, Kant's quest for a justification of objectivity gives way to the acceptance of relativism.

Humboldt rejects, for instance, the instrumental idea of language as a sign system used to represent an independent reality (or a previous thought) and transmit information. Language is not a product but a creative activity, constitutive of the activity of thinking. Words and syntax shape and determine concepts. Language is a condition of possibility of the objectivity of experience, of understanding the world, of access to what is understood. It is, therefore, constitutive of experience. It also allows the intersubjectivity of communication, which is a condition of possibility of the understanding between speakers. Different languages represent different perspectives on the world. It is language that allows the world to appear structured; it determines the objects in the world, but also the world in which they appear. Each language imposes its spirit, making impossible its study in a neutral manner.

Yet another ingredient to contemporary idealism is provided by the Nietzschean tutelage, which will add, to the mentioned presuppositions, the idea that the construction of reality is the result of interest conflicts. This idea has enabled idealist positions to add a nuance of moral superiority to their opposition to realist theories: realists, as a consequence of their incapacity to acknowledge the fact that reality is a construction resulting from conflicts of interest of the powerful, would align themselves with these interests when talking, for instance, of 'facts' as 'objective'.

This idealist point of view is reflected, in the twentieth century, in linguistic proposals such as the Sapir-Whorf thesis, and by authors in the philosophical currents of interpretivism and hermeneutics, who reject the existence of objective facts, accepting only interpretations based on socially determined conceptual frameworks. Finally, the philosopher of science T.S. Kuhn (1962) contributed greatly to contemporary relativism and idealism with his introduction of the concept of 'paradigm' and, in particular, with the idea of 'incommensurability'. Generalizing the Kuhnian thesis, we could say that different cultures live immersed in different paradigms, with disparities concerning a range of variables going from ontology to the methods accepted for the generation of knowledge. These paradigms are incommensurable,

10. We should mention that we are dealing here with the more radical version of the Kuhnian theses. Subsequently, this author softened his views.

11. See, for instance, Laudan (1990).

in the sense that there is no objective benchmark allowing us to say, for instance, which one has developed a better understanding of reality. Each paradigm has its own criteria of excellence by which it judges itself as superior to the rest. In the absence of an external method of comparison, the very possibility of comparison disappears. Moreover, given the differences among paradigms, communication and understanding between members of different paradigms becomes impossible.<sup>10</sup>

In sum, these views have contributed to the rise of relativism by proposing sceptical arguments that have been used primarily to question the possibility both of objective knowledge and of communication between different cultures – each one installed in its own paradigm. Communication, according to these views, should not then be understood as transmission of information regarding a reality independent of the subject, but rather as a means for agreement among individuals belonging in the same community who share a common conceptual system. Reality ceases then to be the measuring stick that determines the correctness of our representations. This correctness will be evaluated solely in terms of the agreement among individuals.

The relativist drift originated in post-Kantian philosophy, and reinforced by arguments such as the ones cited above, has reached extremes, difficult to take seriously. Sokal and Bricmont cite, for instance, a text of the constructivist sociologist of science Bruno Latour, in which this author comments on the possible death of Ramses II by tuberculosis wondering how the pharaoh could die because of a bacillus that Robert Koch discovered in 1882, and ‘clarifies’ that, before Koch, the bacillus had no real existence (Latour 1998).

Leaving aside extreme cases such as this, what can be said about the relativist arguments mentioned above? Perhaps the basic problem with these theses is that they obviate the fact that reality still functions as measuring stick for our knowledge, even taking for granted that we have to go through our conceptual framework to deal with this reality.<sup>11</sup> That is, even taking for granted the idea that observation is contaminated theoretically and that, therefore, the neutrality required by classical epistemology is a fiction, we continue contrasting the theories we conjecture by means of experiments and observations, which lead us to revise these theories when our predictions fail. Similarly, communication among people of different cultures is still possible in so far as there is a reality independent of us about which we speak, which allows us to contrast our statements (this is still the most reasonable thesis).

And, most importantly, let us not forget the sort of arguments that lend support to idealist positions, such as the mentioned ‘jewel’. They constitute the answer to the question: why should anybody be an idealist nowadays? They are based on a model of knowledge abandoned with the demise of the Cartesian epistemology of certainty that governed the philosophical discourse well into the twentieth century. It is now a triviality that this epistemology leads straight into scepticism, so typical relativistic arguments that require certainty, neutrality, or even direct apprehension of the object, in order to speak of the existence

of knowledge, can only conclude what is already well known: (Cartesian) knowledge of reality is impossible. The hopeless problem for contemporary relativism and idealism is that the model of knowledge on which they are sustained is no longer credible.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast with this current of thought, we believe realism can offer a set of presuppositions compatible with research on communication (aside from being commonsensical and assumed by most empirical sciences).

## Back to senses

Let's then return now to the issue that worried us at the beginning. Can realism provide theoretical accounts that explain the notion of sense? The considerations in the first section have led us to reflect on a different aspect of meaning aside from truth-conditions or reference. Words have 'sense'. In fact, from an idealist or constructivist perspective, signs basically have sense, as their referents are constructions built upon a Heraclitean or Nietzschean original chaos through the means of our conceptual schemata. Actually, not only symbols have senses, but so too do most objects with which humans interact. Communication becomes, according to this perspective, not so much a business of exchange of information, but one of interpretation, of getting to the sense of what is conveyed to us.

The fact, however, is that senses can be perfectly dealt with from a realist perspective. Let us try to sketch some ingredients of this perspective. This will require, however, reflecting on at least two aspects of meaning: an intensional facet and a referential facet.

It is, in the first place, a fact, taught to us by the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, that we use linguistic expressions according to rules that are the product of non-explicit conventions. Wittgenstein concluded, in this work, that words are used in very different ways, that these uses constitute the meanings of linguistic expressions, and that semantic investigation should be concerned with the description of language uses. In particular, these uses are supposed to be governed by socially determined rules, which are not necessarily explicit. We have to master semantic rules in order to become competent speakers, and thus, constitute the basis for language knowledge. One speaker will be considered competent in the use of a particular expression when he has mastered the dispositions to behaviour that show his assimilation of the rules corresponding to 'language games' (to use the Wittgensteinian terminology) in which the expression participates. In this context, communication can be understood as the participation of competent users of language in 'language games'. The philosopher's (semanticist's) task is to make clear what these rules are. They provide links among uses of different expressions, thus serving as the foundation for what has traditionally been called 'a priori beliefs', and 'analytical statements', as well as for the intensional aspect of meaning (Campos 2003).

It is true that certain tenets by the later Wittgenstein have served to fuel anti-realist and relativist positions. An example of this is the fact that, according to the Wittgensteinian perspective, given that language

12. In spite of that, we can see traces of these classical idealist theses in a great deal of contemporary literature on Communication Theory. Authors like Carey, Lisbet van Zoonen or Radford, believe that a realist view can hardly help to account for the phenomenon of communication, and call for an alternative model based on a different epistemological foundation (i.e., an idealist one). Thus, for instance, van Zoonen believes that the most important difference between the two models lies in how they understand the concept of 'reality': as a real world of objects, events, situations and processes that exist independently of human perception or as the product of social construction.

games can vary from society to society, a person cannot gain competence in the use of a language unless he is 'immersed' in the 'form of life' associated with it, thus assimilating the rules of its language games. Moreover, discourse concerning a transcendent reality is simply an example of such games, and a supposed correctness standard governing it should not have any relevance for other games. Leaving aside this anti-realist point, with no better support than any of the idealist theses previously examined, the fact is that Wittgenstein contributed enormously to our understanding of the intensional aspect of meaning with his ideas of 'meaning as use', and of language rules.

The other aspect of meaning to which we were referring at the beginning of the section is the referential one: languages have, as one of their primary functions, making reference to reality. While for Wittgenstein, this describing function would be one among a variety of games one can play with language; in the 1970s this second aspect of meaning has acquired a primarily theoretical role. Direct reference authors, such as Putnam and Kripke, initiated a revolution in semantics, and the main tenets of this revolution are still basic in current analytical philosophy of language and cognitive science.

This realist revolution has had important consequences as to how we should understand, for instance, intensions. Thus, the fact is, as explained by John Perry (1990; 1993; 1993a; 1997), Mark Crimmins (1992; 1993), Fred Dretske (1988) or Ruth Millikan (2000), that we possess a conceptual apparatus that allows us to keep track of entities of different varieties and to accumulate information regarding these entities (Sánchez, 1998; Campos and Cirera 2003). The information kept in this system varies from person to person, but some areas of it overlap among individuals. This cognitive capacity provided to us by nature, is, of course, shared by other living creatures, though these creatures lack the possibility of associating it with verbal language such as the one we humans possess.

As we said, information related to the existence of language rules is common to all competent users of a language. A great deal of information about behaviour concerning different objects (how to treat them, what to expect from them, etc.) is also shared at different degrees among members of the same society. There are many attitudes that are shared by people that belong in the same community; even emotional patterns and expectations are, to a certain degree, shared. It is not surprising, then, that this commonality facilitates communication and the consequent coordinated behaviour. Also, it is not surprising that an outsider to the society will find it difficult to penetrate the web of relations, emotions and expectations that culture and education has built in the mental filing system of any member of a society.

It must be stated, however, that the cognitive perspectives of different agents may vary widely, and that, strictly speaking, the only wholly shared part among competent users of a language is constituted by the information about the world acquired through language learning. Another consequence of this model is that different people will be differently affected cognitively by utterances of other agents. It is not so much then that an expression is associated to a particular closed and

limited sense, but that expression will resonate differently in different persons according to their different cognitive architectures.

This view on senses allows us to move toward an understanding of the use of fiction and symbols (from patriotic emblems to advertising icons) in communication. These vehicles are supposed to provoke in us emotions, desires, thoughts and expectations, but not to refer to anything or possess truth or satisfaction-conditions. Communication, in this case, is not the transmission of information or content, but satisfies a lot of the characteristics attributed to it by the ritual view. It allows us to react cognitively and, particularly, emotionally, according, in part, to some patterns predictable in a limited way: as we just mentioned, each agent will react to a sign according to its particular cognitive architecture. When adequately used, they may contribute to social cohesion, as the ritual view emphasizes.

As we said, all these conjectures concerning cognition are formulated from a realist perspective. No construction of facts is derived from this net of beliefs and emotions. We still communicate about the same old reality that, however, can be viewed from particular perspectives. We should not take then the 'personal reality' metaphor literally: there are not particular realities, but only reality seen from particular perspectives – that is, reality, and our opinions on it. There is, then, also an added feature to this realist way of seeing things: it recommends moderating the use of this metaphorical variety of discourse that talks about 'people's truths', or 'people's realities'. This form of speech should be substituted by one based instead on talk about 'people's opinions', 'conjectures', 'theories' or 'fantasies'.

Furthermore, no amount of 'interpretation' of beliefs, emotions, fantasies, etc., will ever reveal to us the true essence of anything. Knowledge of senses will, at best, allow us to understand and predict the conduct of people; a conduct based, surely, on mainly false assumptions. The quest for the sense of things will be simply the quest for the, mostly incorrect, opinions of people on those things, together with the emotions they link to them, but will not allow any deeper access to truth than common sense or science do. Finally, these sets of beliefs and emotions may lead to the construction of social entities, from patterns of generalized behaviour to institutions, perfectly analyzable from a realist perspective by empirical sociology. But, of course, no amount of false opinions on gender, race, insanity, AIDS, or tuberculosis, for instance, will ever have any consequence on the natural facts behind any of these matters.

## Conclusion

In sum, in this article we position ourselves against idealist presuppositions so frequent in the humanities and social sciences, and, particularly, in communication theory. We have tried to argue that a realist approach to the study of communication is not only possible, but also that it does not commit us to some implausible philosophical assumptions. We think that what the phenomenon we call 'communication' consists in, we will only know through the conjecturing of hypotheses that are maximally coherent with the evidence we

possess. In fact, we think that a great amount of work has already been done, within this realist approach, in the direction of considering communication a phenomenon with a biological origin. Communication applies to a number of diverse phenomena that go from signs possessing reference and truth conditions but not sense (as in the case of the simplest living beings) to symbols, used by humans, that lack reference or truth conditions but possess sense and which are supposed to affect us cognitively and emotionally. We think that a realist approach can account for the variety of communicative functions we encounter in human experience, including the ones that involve senses.

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