

The ontic uniqueness and irreducibility of language and communicative actions

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Abstract

The main focus of the argument presented in this (first of two) article(s) is directed towards an investigation of the uniqueness and irreducibility of language and communicative actions. It is done on the basis of the distinction between what is *ontically given* and what can be articulated through the theoretical endeavours of an *ontology*. The argument unfolds with reference to the inherent anatomical limitations of animals in the articulation of truly human language and by mentioning the fact that strictly speaking the human being does not dispose over a single “speech organ.” It also takes into consideration what Plessner has called the “mediated immediacy” of language and the inherent *ambiguity* and *choice* present in linguistic meaning (Cassirer, Nida, De Klerk). Briefly explaining the transition from the rationalistic epistemic ideal of Enlightenment to the historicism of the nineteenth century and to the eventual linguistic turn (end nineteenth beginning twentieth centuries) serves to elucidate why *language* as such eventually became a *new horizon* for reflection during the twentieth century (Heidegger, Gadamer). It is mentioned that Hegel provided a starting-point for communication theory and also that the dialogical principle in the thought of Buber aimed at subject-subject relations at the cost of subject-object relations. Against this background the discussion returns to the problem of uniqueness and multivocality. Examples of primitive (indefinable) terms in mathematics, the discipline of kinematics and the science of linguistics are mentioned. As a first example of the analogical employment of terms the multivocality of *causality* is assessed – with specific reference to *communicative* and *historical* causality. The brief assessment of the positions taken by Jaspers and Habermas and the objection against (unfounded) reductionism should be seen as a transitional introduction to the follow-up article in which the *ontic interconnectedness* and *interdependence* of language and communicative actions will be examined in more detail.

Abstrak

Die hoofokus van die argument wat in hierdie aanvangsartikel ontvou word is om ondersoek in te stel na die uniekheid en onherleibaarheid van talige kommunikasie. Dit geskied teen die agtergrond van die onderskeiding tussen wat *onties-gegewe* is en wat teoreties geartikuleer kan word in 'n *ontologie*. Die argument ontvou met verwysing na die inherente anatomiese beperkinge van diere rakende die artikulering van 'n egte menslike taal en deur daarop te wys dat die mens streng gesproke glad nie oor *spraakorgane* beskik nie. Dit verreken ook wat Plessner bestempel as die *bemiddelde onmiddellikheid* van taal en die onvermydelikheid van *ambiguitet* en *keuse* t.o.v. linguale betekenis (Cassirer, Nida, De Klerk). Deur oorsigtelik die oorgang van die rasionalistiese kennisideaal van die Verligting na die historisme van die negentiende eeu en die “linguistic turn” aan die einde van die negentiende eeu en die begin van die twintigste eeu te skets word die weg geopen om te verstaan waarom *taal* gedurende die twintigste eeu as 'n *nuwe horison* na vore getree het (Heidegger, Gadamer). Melding word daarvan gemaak dat Hegel 'n vertrekpunt bied vir kommunikasieteorie en ook dat die dialogiese beginsel in die denke van Buber subjek-subjek relasies beoog met uitsluiting van subjek-objek relasies. Voorbeelde van primitiewe (ondefinieerbare) terme uit die wiskunde, kinematika en linguistiek word vermeld alvorens meersinnigheid aan die hand van die voorbeeld van kousaliteit en die analogiese benutting daarvan in frases soos kommunikatiewe kousaliteit en historiese kousaliteit beoordeel word. Die vlugtige waardering van die stellingnames van Jaspers en Habermas asook die beswaar teen (ongegronde) reduksionisme

moet gesien word as 'n oorgang en inleiding tot die vervolg-artikel waarin gefokus sal word op die *ontiese samehang* en *interafhanklikheid* van taal en kommunikatiewe handelinge.

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1. Main focus

Whenever attention is asked for the *uniqueness* of something, the other side of the coin is given in its *unbreakable coherence* with what is different from it. In this first article the main focus will be on the uniqueness of language and communication without ignoring issues of coherence. Yet, in a follow-up article the main focus will shift to the intended interconnectedness and interdependence of language and communication while holding on to the outcome of our present argument for uniqueness (irreducibility).

Throughout the history of the West and the East the nature of language occupied the attention of influential thinkers, but by and large language and lingual communication remained the hand-maiden of *rational thought*.¹ The over-estimation of *rationality* established a *rationalistic* legacy running through Greek, Medieval and Modern culture. An investigation of the ontic uniqueness and irreducibility of language and communicative actions will have to highlight key elements in this intellectual history which eventually paved the way for another extreme, the over-estimation of the lingual dimension of reality – given in the contemporary claim that *everything is interpretation*.

By focusing on the uniqueness of the typical human ability to use language and to communicate, we will also briefly pay attention to the anatomical conditions of human language and the relationship between animal and human communication.

But first we have to clarify the relationship between the terms *ontic* and *ontology*.

2. The distinction between ‘ontic’ and ‘ontology’

The title of this article implicitly entails a distinction between the terms *ontic* and *ontology*. Etymologically viewed the term “ontic” is derived from the Greek word for “being.” Within Greek culture this term could be compared with the term *cosmology*, but the latter word eventually (particularly in our contemporary scientific milieu) acquired a narrower connotation, mainly restricted to reflections on the conjectured *physical* origins of the universe. The basis for the distinction between *ontic* and *ontology* is found in differentiating between what is *given* in (ontic) reality and what appears as a theme within our human reflection (ontology) about what is given within

¹ An extreme version of this idea is found in the thought of the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tse. His conclusion is: “He who knows does not speak, he who speaks does not know” (Vygotsky, 1966:153). For the Würzburg-school and Bergson language confuses pure thinking. Tjutchev said: “A thought once uttered is a lie” (cf. Cassirer, 1957:161-162).

reality. The suffix “-logy” captures the *result* of human thinking, whereas whatever was thought about belongs to reality in its *ontic givenness*.

Particularly in the English language it is a standard practice to use the suffix “-logy” (or an equivalent of it) and to confuse it with what is *given* in reality – where the actual intention may simply be to refer to something that is not *produced* by human linguistic acts, human cognition or human thought-activities. For example, when scholars refer to *living entities* they tend to speak about *biological* phenomena instead of *biotical phenomena*. Likewise, sociologists often speak about *sociological* phenomena where *social phenomena* are intended. Language scholars and people interested in what is present in human communication also refer to *linguistic* phenomena (instead of *lingual* phenomena). Clearly, a living plant functions organically as a *biotic* entity and only when a scholarly (scientific) investigation into the peculiarities of this kind of organic functioning is undertaken is it appropriate to employ the term “biology” – which is then used to designate the scientific study of *biotic* phenomena. Similarly the scholarly discipline of *sociology* studies social phenomena and the disciplines of linguistics and communication sciences study (amongst other things) *lingual* phenomena. When a male and female student are walking hand-in-hand on campus, this event could be studied from various angles of approach. Looking at it from the *social aspect* may highlight it as a *social* phenomenon (that can be studied by the discipline of *sociology*). The *lingual* interaction between them may be of interest for *linguistics* and *communication science*.

This article will therefore attempt to account for those *ontic conditions* lying at the basis of lingual and communicative human actions. One avenue open to such an investigation is to look at the employment of the *basic terms* operative within language and communication and to investigate their *uniqueness* and their *ontic referents*. But before we do that we will briefly highlight the anatomical limitations of animals in respect of language and the difference between animal and human communication.

3. Does language (and communication) demarcate human beings from animals?

Since language enables humanity to own and to utilize a consciousness of the past and the future, it includes knowledge of the limited lifespan of the individual person. Cassirer (cf. 1944) introduces the well-known distinction between *signals* and *symbols*. The former belongs to the *physical* world of *being* and the latter is a part of the human world of *meaning*, the world of *human culture*. Von Bertalanffy says that symbolism “if you will, is the divine spark distinguishing the most perfectly adapted animal from the poorest specimen of the human race” (Von Bertalanffy, 1968:20). In order to identify symbols, he uses three criteria: (i) Symbols are *representative*, i.e., the symbol stands in one way or the other for the thing symbolized; (ii) Secondly, symbols are *transmitted by tradition*, i.e., by learning processes of the individual in contrast to innate instincts; (iii) Finally, symbols are *freely created* (Von Bertalanffy, 1968:15, cf. Von Bertalanffy, 1968a:134).

According to Buber reality reveals itself to humankind in two ways, since the “I” stands in two kinds of fundamental relations: the *I-Thou* relationship and the *I-It* relationship. For Buber no *I-in-itself* exists, since the word *I* always encompasses one of these two relationships. *He* and *She* falls within the *I-It* relationship. The world as we experience it, with the *It*, *He*, and *She*, even with internal experiences or secrets

reserved for the initiated, already consists of *Its*, of *Objects*. Experiences of this world are not reciprocal, and affect only human beings, who experience them. Thus, the *world-as-experience* belongs with the fundamental term *I-It*. In contrast to this the fundamental term *I-Thou*, which is the basis for the world-of-relationship, does not know any *inner barriers* since only *Its* are mutually delimited. The *I-Thou* relationship exists in the presence of *encounter*, since only in this relationship does the present reveal itself. The objects of the *I-It* relationship, however, are experienced in the past. The individual *Thou* becomes *It* after the experience of encounter, and the individual *It* can become *Thou* by stepping into the experience of encounter (see Buber, 1969:5 ff., 12, 17, 30, 37, 47 ff.).

Buber intends to characterize the personal encounter of *I* and *Thou* in *seclusion* from every *I-It* (subject-object) relation – but he still emphasizes that the *I* in relation to the *Thou* is shaped “in dialogue” (Buber, 1969:71). In another work (with dialogue as theme) he states that language does not stick in the human being since the latter takes its stand in language and argues from it: “Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou” (Buber, 1962:41). Yet, although *language* and *dialogue* come to expression in the mutuality of an inter-*subjective* relationship, it can only function on the basis of an undeniable *subject-object* relationship, thus challenging Buber's attempt to separate subject-subject and subject-object relations. Helmut Plessner saw this clearly in his understanding of the *eccentric* nature of the human being and in his view of language as a *mediated immediacy*.

3.1 The ‘eccentricity’ of the human being: Plessner

Helmut Plessner wants to transcend the self-contradictory notion of an “entelechie”, presented to him by his tutor, the (neo-vitalistic) biologist Hans Driesch. As an alternative, he introduces the notion of *positionality*. *Physical* entities are delimited by the surrounding environment. In the case of *organic* entities, this delimitation *belongs to the entity itself* (for example, the membrane), and thus evinces *positionality* (Plessner, 1975:291). This concept provides the possibility to view human beings as belonging to the last level of living beings. Whereas animals are considered to be *closed* and *centric* they are distinguished from human beings who are *eccentric* living beings (and who are relatively “Weltoffen” – “open to the world”) (Plessner, 1975: 292). The first anthropological “Grundgesetz” (fundamental law) mentioned at the end of his Book: “Die Stufen des Organischen und des Menschen” (1965) states the “vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit” (mediated immediacy) valid for all eccentric positions (cf. Plessner, 1975:297).

He holds that language positions itself intermediate between the *grasp* of the hand and the *purview* of the eye – the eye as the “organ of making-something-immediately-present”. Thus, through language, in various respects the hand and the eye become *dispensable* (cf. Hofer & Altner, 1972:203). *Animal communication*, according to Plessner, does not know a “mediation through objects” (1975a:380, cf.379).² This argument implicitly accounts for what could be designated as *lingual objectification*. Through lingual objectification lingual meanings are assigned to lingual objects (written language, verbal language, ‘body’ language, etc.). This possibility to assign

² Surely, this phenomenon is particularly remarkable, since, in the domain of human sensitivity, the sense of seeing and the sense of touching dominate that of smelling (cf. Haeffner, 1982:16).

certain meanings to particular verbal sounds or letter combinations enables possible lingual acts of *naming*. But it is only when such signs are *shared* by multiple sign users in *mutual communication* that language as such emerges. Language is therefore inherently dependent upon both subject-subject and subject-object relations!³ With reference to the experiments done with the chimpanzees Sarah and Washoe Plessner remarks that animals are not capable to transmit what they have learned in a species-specific manner through a tradition continued from generation to generation (Plessner, 1975a:379; see Ploog, 1972).

Animal communication does not refer to the past or the future. It is caught up in the vital *here and now*. For this reason animal signs have *strictly one content* for every single sign. All human utterances, by contrast, can *signify* a number of different things, depending on the *context, intention*, or even, in the case of *written language*, the *punctuation*. Compare this with the famous dance of the bees which always indicates by means of the (i) *tempo*, (ii) *direction* and (iii) *angle* of the figure eight executed, the (i) *distance*, (ii) *location*, and (iii) *direction* of the source found (cf. Overhage, 1972:211 ff.). Human language and communication, on the other hand, presupposes a freedom of choice and the concomitant *multiplicity of meaning*, requiring *interpretation* (and sharing with others) which in turn requires further interpretation from the *addressee* (cf. Nida, 1979:203; De Klerk, 1978:6). Cassirer also emphatically states that all “linguistic denotation is essentially ambiguous” (Cassirer, 1946:4). It therefore presupposes the responsible free activity of the human being, which requires responsible choices amidst multiple options.

3.2 Animal “speech”: anatomical limitations

With the exception of the human being the order of primates is noticeably poor in the production of nuanced sounds. The sounds of Mammals simply do not compare with, for example, birdsong. Ever since Descartes it was believed that the *uniqueness* of the human brain is responsible for *human language*. The result was that anatomists insisted that anthropoids also have the “machinery” available to articulate speech. The order of primates nevertheless is unable to vocalize. The ability to reproduce human speech sounds as it is found in birds is totally absent in mammals. The vocal potential of the gorilla and orangutan is exceptionally poor. The chimpanzee is somewhat better off, and the gibbon can produce sounds covering almost an octave. All these anthropoids, however, completely lack the playful sounds produced by the human suckling. The unprecedented flexibility present in the human production of sound *transcends* that of the anthropoids by far. In addition this sound production displays an exceptionally rich *modifiability* (Overhage, 1972:242).

Post mortem studies of the upper respiratory tract in mammals as well as cineradiographic studies have shown that the position of the larynx is crucial in determining the way in which an individual breathes, swallows and vocalizes (Laitman, 1985:281). This implies that there are certain anatomical peculiarities which go hand in hand with the contribution of brain functioning in the production of human speech, in particular the gradual descent of the larynx after the post-natal period (cf. Portmann, 1973:423).

³ In addition it is also dependent upon the social disclosure of the lingual aspect (the *sign mode*) – as Wittgenstein argued, there is no ‘private’ language.

The way in which the “humanlike” apes (anthropoids, i.e. the orangutan, gorilla, chimpanzee, and gibbon), are borne, owing to their anatomical shortcomings, make them incapable to speak. It is interesting to note that at birth the human larynx is positioned in exactly the same way as that of all other Mammals. One reason for this is that the human infant needs a way for milk to flow which is separate from the windpipe. The baby can breathe calmly while drinking. Because of this the human infant is incapable of speech, like all Mammals. Only by means of the gradual removal of this division, caused by the downward movement of larynx – freeing the larger pharynx cavity – the human person is eventually enabled to speak. Only human beings possess an intermediate area in between the nasal cavity and the larynx where air and food channels freely cross. (see Laitman, 1985: 282). Goertler even mentions the fact that in the third month after conception a distinctively *human structural element* develops (it is called the vocal chord “blastem” – Goertler, 1972:250).

As a result, these early hominids probably had a very restricted vocal repertoire as compared with modern adult humans. For example, the high larynx would have made it impossible for them to produce some of the “universal vowel sounds found in human speech patterns” (Laitman, 1985:284).⁴

If we define a speech-organ as that bodily part which exists solely in service of the production of speech sounds, then the surprising fact is that there are *no human speech organs*. Possible candidates are: the lungs, larynx, mouth cavity, palate, teeth, lips and nose cavity. Without an exception, all these organs perform primary functions which would continue to function in their normal way even if human beings never uttered a single word (Overhage, 1972:243)! Human language simply takes hold of all these different organs in the production of speech sounds – it is a “totality-phenomenon.”⁵

Having argued that human language indeed evinces the distance between human beings and animals, we now return to the subtle transitions present in the history of the intellectual assessment of the nature of language and communication.

4. From human reason to history and language

During the Enlightenment (18th century) the emphasis was fully on *human reason* – on the one hand to liberate it from any external authority and on the other to inspire humans as rational being not to be *shy* to employ their rational abilities autonomously. Immanuel Kant emphatically stated:

Our age is, in every sense of the word, the age of criticism and everything must submit to it. Religion, on the strength of its sanctity, and law on the strength of its majesty, try to withdraw themselves from it; but by doing so they arouse just suspicions, and cannot claim that sincere respect which reason pays to those only

⁴ His conjecture is that the first instances of full basicranial flexion similar to modern humans do not appear until the arrival of *Homo sapiens* (estimated by him at 300,000 to 400,000 years ago): “It may have been at this time that hominids with upper respiratory tracts similar to ours first appeared” (1985:286).

⁵ “Such an unfathomable process of change affecting so many differently structured organs and organ complexes, closely correlated with each other, should have proceeded harmoniously as a total change, if it was to come to the unprecedented perfection of human speech” (Overhage, 1972:250).

who have been able to stand its free and open examination (Kant, 1781:A-12 – translation F.M. Müller).⁶

The obvious lack of a focus on and appreciation of language as such in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) did generate the criticism of Jacobi, Hamann and Herder. The latter even called the human being a *creation of language*.⁷ Although the exploration of this accent had to await the genesis of the so-called “linguistic turn” at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the early 19th century did explore the meaning of language. Particularly Hegel provided certain starting-points for the inter-subjectivity involved in linguistic communication. He conceives language as being constituted by self-consciousness where the latter, in its being there *for the other*, at once also manifests a splitting off of the self from itself and thus enables a merging of the other with self-consciousness (one hears oneself as one is heard by the other). Hegel therefore qualifies “*language as the being-there of the spirit*” (“*die Sprache als das Dasein des Geistes*”).⁸ According to Krüger the way in which Hegel explained the form quality in terms of a theory of predication⁹ indeed provided the design of a universal theory of communication (see Krüger, 1999:703).

But it should be remembered that the background of the linguistic turn is found in the *historicism* of the 19th century, which eventually led to an unbridled *relativism*. In 1922 Troeltsch captures this relativistic spirit when he writes: “We see here everything in the flow of change, in endless and constantly new individualization, in its being determined by the past and in the direction to an unknown future. State, law, morality, religion and art are dissolved in historical change and they are everywhere only understandable as ingredients of historical developments” (Troeltsch, 1922:573).¹⁰

After the linguistic turn Heidegger and Gadamer realized that *language itself* may be emphasized in order to escape from the relativism entailed by historicism. Van Niekerk acknowledges this step when he points out that according to Gadamer the ‘world’ should be recognized as a *creation of language* (Van Niekerk, 1993:39). Heidegger also realized that a *new universal* was needed. In *Being and Time* he focused on “there-being” as a “being-in-the-world” although he still maintained the emphasis on historical being (“*geschichtliches Dasein*”). However, as Gadamer points out,

⁶ Kant holds that humankind is guilty of its own *immaturity* – where *immaturity* is given in the incapacity to exercise ones understanding without external guidance. The motto of the Enlightenment is therefore: “Have the courage to serve yourself with your own understanding!” (Kant 1784:A481). Kant believed that he does not live in a time that is already enlightened, but in a time that is in the *process* of enlightenment (taken as a *verb* – Kant, 1784:A491).

⁷ “Der Mensch ist ein freidenkendes, thätiges Wesen, dessen Kräfte in Progression fortwürken; darum sei er ein Geschöpf der Sprache!” (Herder, 1978:73).

⁸ “Wir sehen hiemit wieder die *Sprache* als das Dasein des Geistes. Sie ist das *für andre* seiende Selbstbewußtsein, welches unmittelbar *al solches vorhanden* und als *dieses* allgemeines ist. Sie ist das sich von sich selbst abtrennende Selbst, das als reines Ich = Ich sich gegenständlich wird, in dieser Gegenständlichkeit sich ebenso als *dieses* selbst erhält, wie es unmittelbar mit den andern zusammenfließt und *ihr* Selbstbewußtsein ist; es vernimmt ebenso sich, als es von den Andern vernommen wird, und das Vernehmen ist eben das *zum Slebst gewordene Dasein*” (Hegel, 1807:458).

⁹ Compare Hegel, 1830:245-269.

¹⁰ “Wir sehen hier alles im Flusse des Werdens, in der endlosen und immer neuen Individualisierung, in der Bestimmtheit durch Vergangenes und in der Richtung auf unerkanntes Zukünftiges. Staat, Recht, Moral, Religion, Kunst sind in den Fluss des historischen werdens aufgelöst und uns überall nur als Bestandteil geschichtlicher Entwicklungen verständlich”.

Heidegger did not once more wanted to introduce something essential or divine with his notion of *Sein* (Being). Much rather his purpose was to introduce something like an event which opens the *space* in which hermeneutics could become (without any *final* foundation) a *new universal* (“zum neuen Universale wird”). This space is the dimension of language.¹¹

The horizon of the past three centuries is thus filled with the successive *epistemic ideals* of universal conceptual knowledge (18th century), of the uniqueness, irrepeatability and individuality of historical change (19th century) and of the constitutive role of human language (even in the social construction of reality) 20th century (to which we shall return in the follow-up article). A *positive* appreciation of this development is given in the acknowledgement that *logicality*, *historicity* and *linguisticity* are indispensable *conditions* of *being human* – without isolating and elevating any one of them to become the sole and exclusive condition of being human. The *conditio humana* is indeed just as *many-sided* as the experiential world in which we live.

The mentioned many-sidedness invites us to identify what is at stake when we assume the human ability to use language and to communicate. If this capacity indeed captures a universal human ability we can designate its *universality* by employing the term already used above, namely *linguisticity*.

5. The irreducibility of communication: the problem of analogical terms

There is no academic discipline that can escape from the employment of *key terms* or *basic concepts*. The problem entailed in this practice surfaces as soon as it is realized that *different* disciplines frequently use the *same* terms or concepts – albeit within alternative contexts. This *multivocality* requires a theoretical account of the *primitive meaning* of basic terms in order to explain what is *similar* and what is *different* between them. One can also say that establishing the *primitive meaning* of a term goes hand-in-hand with an account of the use of *analogical* concepts.¹² The important thing is to realize that *truly basic terms* are not only unique and irreducible but also *indefinable*.

For example, in Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory first order predicate calculus is assumed and on that basis it introduces as *undefined term* the specific set-theoretical primitive binary predicate \in which is called the *membership relation* (Fraenkel et al., 1973:23). The same can be said about (lingual) meaning – within the discipline of linguistics (and the sub-discipline of semantics) *meaning* serves as a *primitive term*. Quine did realize that the attempt to define analyticity¹³ in terms of meaning runs into a circularity since meaning is defined in terms of analyticity – causing Fodor to underscore that there is no meaning-independent way of characterizing either *analyticity* or *meaning* (Fodor, 1977:43).

Another example is given in the core *kinematic* meaning of a *uniform motion* – reflected in Einstein's postulate regarding the “vacuum-velocity” of light.¹⁴ The *mechanistic* main tendency of classical (Newtonian) physics found in Heinrich Hertz its last important

¹¹ “Dieser Raum ist die Dimension der Sprache” – Gadamer, 1989:172.

¹² This distinction once more highlights the distinct foci of the present article and the subsequent follow-up article. The former aims at what is unique (‘primitive’), whereas the latter will examine the meaning-coherence in which what is unique is fitted.

¹³ A sentence is supposed to be *analytically* true if it is true only on the basis of its *meaning*.

¹⁴ Since Einstein proceeds on the basis of the *constancy* of light (in a vacuum) (see Einstein, 1982:30-31), his designation of his theory as a theory of *relativity* should actually be seen as a concession to the *historicistic* ‘Zeitgeist’ of the first couple of decades of the 20th century!

representative for Hertz really thought that the discipline of physics could be erected without the employment of the (physical) concept of *force* (he believed that the concepts of mass, space and time are sufficient).¹⁵ Einstein also points out that Hertz attempted to liberate mechanics from the concept of potential energy (i.e., force).¹⁶

But we continue our investigation of the nature of uniqueness in terms of analogical *usages*, for it is only on the basis of this uniqueness that it makes sense to account for analogical usages of such basic terms.¹⁷

Consider for example the classical term *causality*. The methodological foundations of the humanities indeed witness a richly varied appreciation of this concept. Those with a *naturalistic* orientation may be prone to claim that *causal relations* evinced in overt actions are only susceptible to *natural scientific* investigations,¹⁸ whereas someone working within the *hermeneutical* tradition may have serious reservations in this regard (cf. the conviction of Gadamer, 1967:193-194 or the sociologist Spann¹⁹ and what is more recently said by Appleby and his co-writers²⁰).

Likewise a similar ambiguity is involved in our understanding of *language* and the use of the term *communication*. A statement made by Derrida may be used to start our exploration of this question. He asks the question:

Is it certain that there corresponds to the word *communication* a unique, univocal concept, a concept that can be rigorously grasped and transmitted: a communicable concept? (Derrida, 1982:307).

What is significant is that Derrida immediately leaves behind him the *conceptual context* by switching to a (n interpretative) *lingual context*, reminiscent of the linguistic turn alluded to above:

one first must ask whether the word or signifier ‘communication’ communicates a determined content, an identifiable meaning, a describable value (Derrida, 1982: 307).

¹⁵ Soon after his death in January 1894 his comprehensive theoretical work appeared: “The Principles of Mechanics developed in a New Context” (*Die Prinzipien der Mechanik in neuem Zusammenhange dargestellt* – 312 pp.). His mechanistic reductionism caused him to view the concept of force as being *internally antinomic* (see Katscher, 1970:329).

¹⁶ Heinrich “[hat] in seinem letzten Werk versuchte, die Mechanik von dem Begriff der potentiellen Energie (d.h. der Kraft) zu befreien” (Einstein, 1959:30).

¹⁷ A more detailed analysis of the meaning of communication will be given in the follow-up article because the predominant way in which the ‘definition’ of communication is presented will require that we explain the nature of analogical concept formation in more detail.

¹⁸ Cf. the position of Neurath of the *Vienna Circle*, (Neurath, 1973a:358 ff.): “Sociology on a materialist basis deals therefore only with relations of men or with their environment. It knows only of such behavior of men that one can observe and ‘photograph’ scientifically. ‘Empathy’ is not a scientific tool, nor is a special ‘understanding’ a special aspect of ‘humanistic’ science. ... Scientific sociology is in opposition to the usual psychology which operates with ‘experience’ (Erleben) and similar empathy-like activities, and not with physical data; ... Sociology on a materialist foundation knows no effective structures which are not spatial and temporal” (Neurath, 1973:361).

¹⁹ Spann writes: “It is clear that through an interpretative understanding, through an investigation of the meaning quality of an object, every form of causality is fundamentally excluded” (Spann, 1934:130-131).

²⁰ Against the background of their postmodern orientation they establish a “shift” away from “documentation to interpretation, away from reconstructing a chain of events to exploring their significance” and they continue: “Using a conceptual shorthand, we could say that meaning has replaced cause as the central focus of attention” (Appleby, et al. 1996:1).

At this point the crucial question is:

What is the difference between a multivocal *concept* and a *word* allowing for *multiple interpretations*?²¹

Thus far we have referred to *causality* and (lingual) *communication* – suggesting that both categories reflect facets of reality that are (ontically) unique. This *uniqueness* gains in significance when the *interdependence* between communication and causality is examined.

5.1 Communicative causality

One way to answer questions about multivocality and uniqueness is to consider the connection between primitive (and irreducible) domains, such as what is present in an analysis of the relatedness of *human* communication and the meaning of *causality*. Even if we leave aside the controversy between a *deterministic* and an *indeterministic* understanding of *causality* within modern physics,²² it is generally accepted that *causality* constitutes a relation between *cause* and *effect*. Suppose now that *communication* between human beings is described in terms of the communicative *effect* that is *caused* by such an interaction. Is it then permissible to speak about *communicative causality* – as it is implicitly done, for example, by Austin within his entire theory of *performative utterances* and *speech acts*?²³ Does this suggest that the *basic concepts* employed by the natural sciences – such as the physical concept of *causality* – might indeed legitimately also be used by disciplines within the *humanities*?

Although the answer is affirmative, the main stream of a modern philosophical understanding of *causality* proceeds from an inherent dualistic view of reality in which *causality* and *freedom* were radically opposed. The hermeneutical philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, did pay attention to this issue, but his orientation witnesses a *hesitation* when the term causality is used within the humanities – in particular in the context of *history*. In his initial reflection on the relation between *causality* and *history* Gadamer does seem to leave room for the employment of the concept of *causality* within the field of *history*, though he warns that the *historical coherence* of events cannot be *predicted*. But when he mentions the statement of Von Ranke, namely that *world history* is constituted as “scenes of freedom” (Gadamer, 1967:193) his hesitation manifests itself in the fact that he oftentimes puts the term *cause* within parenthesis (Gadamer, 1967:194, 200).

This reservation becomes more significant through his remark that *causality* actually *hampers* human *freedom* and *responsibility* (see Gadamer, 1967:193-194), for it

²¹ Whether or not the general claim can be made that the “linguistic sign,” although not uniting a *thing* and a *name*, does unite “a concept and a sound-image” exceeds the confines of this article. Compare the distinction between the *signifier* and the *signified* in the thought of De Saussure, 1966:66 ff.

²² Heisenberg established that “it will never be possible to determine both the position and velocity of an atomic particle with an arbitrary precision” (Heisenberg, 1956:11). In April 1927, before he made known his relation of uncertainty, Heisenberg (in a personal conversation) said to Von Weizsäcker: “I believe I have disproved the law of causality” (Von Weizsäcker, 1993:132, note).

²³ His well-known work bears the title: *How to Do Things With Words?* (see Austin, 1962). He distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary actions. Locutionary acts are what we have called lingual objectification (the utterance and inscription of words), whereas illocutionary acts are acts taking such words a step further by *asking*, *commanding*, *asserting*, *promising* and so on.

demonstrates that the tension already present in early modern philosophy, namely that between *nature* (causality) and *freedom*, still forms an inherent part of his thinking.²⁴ It is particularly evident from his question: “Does causality presuppose freedom or does it rather exclude freedom?” (Gadamer, 1967:196). His ultimate preference is to avoid the concept of causality (of course understood in the restricted sense of a determined relation between causes and effects) within the domain of history. Because he nonetheless continues to speak about ‘causes’ within historical descriptions and explanations, he had to look for an escape route – and he found it in the equally well-known connection of *causality* and *teleology* in modern philosophy. His claim is that ‘causes’ within the domain of human action are always found within a *teleological* coherence (Gadamer, 1967:200).²⁵

Before we return to the problem of communication we first briefly investigate other instances of analogical usages of the term *causality*.

5.2 Analogical usages of the term *causality*: against reductionism

In the final analysis – in spite of lip-service to a dualistic approach aimed at the elimination of the concept of causality – most scholars within the domain of the humanities, at least *implicitly*, employ the term causality or some of its derivatives [terms such as ‘effects,’ ‘validity’ (‘being-in-force’), and so on].²⁶ But once it is affirmed that one can use the concept of *causality* within the humanities, then the remaining burning question is: are the humanities supposed to use the term *cause* in the *same sense* as physics or are they entitled to use it *analogically*? There are clearly two options:

- (i) either it is used in the *same* sense – but then the distinction between the humanities and the natural sciences collapses, or
- (ii) it is used in a *different* sense – in which case a closer analysis (and justification) of this *difference* is required.

Option (i) leads to a *reductionistic* position, canceling in principle the *distinctness* of different scholarly disciplines, for if *different* disciplines employ their basic concepts in exactly the *same sense*, then it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to justify their *distinctness* as disciplines.²⁷

The second option generates a new challenge, namely to explain how the *same term* can be used in different (analogous) ways. Obviously, in this case there must be both *similarities* and *differences* (or: *continuity* and *discontinuity*). This, in fact, even applies to various natural sciences, for these disciplines indeed do frequently employ the *same*

²⁴ In his treatise on the *Origin and Inequality between Human Beings*, Rousseau brought this dualism under words: “Nature commands every animal, and the brute obeys. The human being experiences the same impulse, but recognizes the freedom to acquiesce or to resist; and particularly in the awareness of this freedom the spirituality of humankind manifests itself. ... but in the capacity to will, or much rather to choose, and the experience of this power, one encounters nothing but purely spiritual acts which are totally inexplicable through mechanical laws” (Rousseau, 1975:47).

²⁵ An analysis of the philosophical background of the distinction between *causality* and *teleology* is found in Strauss, 2002:298 ff.

²⁶ Derrida wrote an extensive article on the “force of law” (cf. Derrida, 2002) and also Habermas lays great weight on the notion of “Geltung” (*validity*) (see Habermas, 1998).

²⁷ *Reductionism* is only bad when it is attempted to reduce what is truly irreducible. In following ideas of Bunge the physicist Margenau argues for a *moderate* reductionism, comprising “the strategy ... of reducing whatever can be reduced without however ignoring emergence or persisting in reducing the irreducible” (Margenau, 1982:187, 196-197).

term in different contexts. Within modern biology, for example, it is perfectly meaningful to refer to the *biotic effects* of *environmental factors* on living entities, normally discussed in the context of *adaptation*. Similarly, one may speak about the *emotional effects* of something like *anxiety* on a particular human being. Next to *physical* causes and effects there are therefore also *biotic* and *emotional* causes and effects.²⁸

Since Spann always interprets *causality* in terms of the *external mechanical succession of phenomena* (that is to say, to the totality of the preceding factors upon which phenomena follow as their temporal consequent), he opposes it to the *interpretative understanding* of the humanities. According to him, the latter has to do with the disclosure of *meaningful coherences* related to *internal categories* (Spann, 1934:131). In order to elucidate the principal difference between these two methods, Spann provides the following example which simply underscores his *dualistic* approach, since it denies the possibility to speak about *social causation* at all: “What occurs between two fighters according to the meaning-quality of the event is *battle (Kampf)*, whereas the external mechanical causality of the event is characterized by the ‘energy transformation of the arm muscles,’ ‘accelerated movement of weapons’ (the iron swords), ‘elasticity’ and ‘oxidation’ (the sparks), and so on” (Spann, 1934: 131 note b).

The thought of Karl Jaspers, who is particularly known for his extensive discussion of *communication* (see Jaspers, 1948:338-396), reveals a similar tension between the domain of authentic human action (normally associated with or qualified as *freedom*) and what is considered to be causally determined – and something similar is even found in the thought of Habermas.

5.3 Causality versus totality and meaning: Jaspers and Habermas

Jaspers identifies *causality* with its *deterministic* (physicalistic) understanding (see Jaspers, 1948:439) and he opposes *causality* with the I and another I who are, in their communication, *ideally* bound by an encompassing *totality (Ganzheit)* (Jaspers 1948:342).²⁹ The historical uniqueness of communication is a non-objective totality without any foundation (*Grund*) – it does not originate in the sense that eventually I acquire something, for in communication I actually becomes myself.³⁰ I am only myself in my *freedom* when the other is and wants to be who s/he is, and this can only be comprehended on the basis of the possibility of *freedom*. For Jaspers *existential communication* – flowing from freedom – is therefore incomprehensible in an *objective* sense.³¹

²⁸ David Hume actually pursued an opposite path in the formulation of his claim that there are no *physical* causes and effects. He argues that what we call *causality* simply follows from *psychical laws of association* based upon *custom, habit* and *belief*: “after a repetition of similar instances, the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe that it will exist” (Hume, *Enquiry*, VII,2).

²⁹ “... bei der Kommunikation dieses Ichs mit dem anderen Ich als vertretbarer Punkt die weitere Grenze: die übergreifende Idee von Ganzheiten, in denen sie wirken, durch die sie nicht kausal, sondern ideel gebunden sind.”

³⁰ “Das geschichtlich Einmalige der Kommunikation ist ein Ganzes, das nicht entsteht, indem ich selbst schon bin und nun etwas hinzugewinne, sondern worin ich selbst erst eigentlich werde: aber als unobjektives Ganzes ist sie grundlos” (Jaspers, 1948:346).

³¹ “Der Sinn des Satzes, daß ich erst ich selbst in meiner Freiheit bin, wenn der Andere er selbst ist und sein will, und ich mit ihm, ist nur *aus Freiheit als Möglichkeit zu* ergreifen. Während die Kommunikationen im Bewußtsein überhaupt und in der Tradition erkennbare Daseinsnotwendig-

In the thought of Habermas a similar opposition is found, though his basic distinction is not between causality and freedom, but between *causality* and *meaning*.³²

6. Provisional conclusion

In this first article we have explored a number of basic considerations regarding the uniqueness and irreducibility of language and communication – including an assessment of why language and communication could be seen as a line of demarcation between human beings and animals. The historical perspective on the development of the eventual (over) emphasis on language acknowledged the relatively positive outcome of this process as it is given in the acceptance of the co-conditioning role of logicity, historicity and linguisticity. Against this background the discussion returned to the problem of uniqueness and multivocality – with specific reference to communicative and historical causality. The brief assessment of the positions taken by Jaspers and Habermas followed by the objection against reductionism should be seen as a transitional introduction to the follow-up article in which the ontic interconnectedness and interdependence of language and communicative actions will be examined in more detail.

Language and communicative actions reflect a uniqueness and irreducibility that is underscored by inter-functional coherences. Alongside other dimensions, such as logicity and historicity, ‘linguisticity’ co-determines the nature of being human and serve to demarcate human communication from animal communication.

Key Words: Reason; relativism; speech organs; language; communicative action; irreducibility; interconnectedness; analogical terms, communicative causality

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keiten sind, ohne die ein Versinken ins Unbewußte unausweichlich würde, ist die Notwendigkeit existentieller Kommunikation nur eine solche der Freiheit, darum objektiv unbegreiflich” (Jaspers, 1948:345). *Objective* here means: *in causal terms*.

³² Just recall the statement of Appleby *et al* quoted earlier, namely that *meaning* has replaced *cause* as the central focus of attention (cp. Habermas, 1981:145).

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