_____

World, language, communication: fuzzy boundaries and complex systems

Elisabetta Gola
University of Cagliari
egola@unica.it

Fabrizio Meloni
University Hospital of Cagliari
fmeloni@aoucagliari.it

Andrea Volterrani
University of Rome "Tor Vergata"
andrea.volterrani@uniroma2.it

0. Introduction

Languages, media, culture and communication are interwoven aspects of the ways in which human beings represent, understand and share the world. Reality, indeed, is not something that we simply catch and mirror, but rather build with two main inescapable constraints: how our cognitive (in the largest sense) embodied system works and the structure of natural and social environment, from which we receive continuous inputs.

This scenario has been discussed from an epistemological point of view by Popper (1975), who distinguished three perspectives through which we come into contact with the 'world':

1. World 1: physical objects (reality)
2. World 2: subject's states of consciousness (thought)
3. World 3: the way in which we represent and communicate (language)

No simple and unidirectional causal relation passes from World 1 to 3 that an ingenuous realism can maintain[1]. Instead, the three worlds, although relatively independent, interact with and influence each other. For example, language influences the way in which we understand reality: even the physical world appears differently if we consider the classical physical laws or the mathematics of quantum mechanics. However, the distinctions among different representations and perspectives about the world, is even more evident with social reality. The way in which we speak—such as about a group of people as women, trans or migrants, for example—defines their place in our imagination and in reality. For centuries, both the actions and thoughts of people have been dependent on the definitions of media and public discourse. Vice versa, we can recognise those groups in language and thoughts because of their present differences in reality. These differences stimulate our classification processes, but the symbolic world

_____

[1]See Putnam (1975) for a discussion.

_____

and power of public communication induce stereotypes creation, political opinions and discriminations.

This is the reason for the inclusion of a panel on philosophy and theory of language in a scientific context in the medcom2020 conference, to devote further analysis on sociological issues and phenomena. We believe that to understand the complete picture of a communication phenomenon requires the consideration of the abovementioned three aspects and their relationships.

Indeed, in our perspective, the perception is the process closest to reality,

> 'Passes' from the world of language, which is mainly medial, and then builds a double relationship with the world of thought on the one hand and the world of reality on the other, although not without transformations of meaning and significance. Such transformations take place in a proximal zone in which more advanced collective representations can affect individual representations. This place is a boundary zone in which collective and historically institutionalised representations, i.e. what Popper terms World 3 retroacts on the World 2 of individual beliefs (Tagliagambe 1997). This perspective is important as it points out that the process of creating representations from the physical world is neither deterministic nor unidirectional, but constitutes a boundary zone in which several forces are at play. (Volterrani, 2022)

In this study, we examine three cases, which, starting from one of these three Popperian worlds, show the effects on the other two and how changes in our comprehension, behaviours and actions are—in a relevant way—based on the complex system of communication. Starting from these reflections, we eventually present the papers collected in this Special Issue of Rivista di Filosofia del Linguaggio (RIFL).

1. World 1: Reframing reality: the case of social communication

Several topics are not easy to communicate, because they cannot leverage the principles of advertising; that is, stimulate 'happiness' and positive emotions. Difficult and 'uncomfortable' realities such as a pandemic, blood harvesting, or poverty cannot be communicated through simple and direct 'call to action'.

A different strategy that is based on stimulating the knowledge of reality that we want to communicate and change is necessary, and this is possible in a model that starts from the study of the perception of reality and develops ways to involve those who live in reality and consider raising the degree of knowledge. However, this goal requires interaction and epistemic use of emotions.

The University Hospital of Cagliari is a good example. The hospital is present on all social and messaging platforms, creating a large community to bring together citizens, public health and health workers. The goal is to be close to citizens, not to wait for them to have a problem but to reach, meet and help them.

This goal has been achieved by putting together all traditional and innovative communication modes. Their activity on social media is very strong with significant growth; consider that in the period of 26 March to 24 April, the institutional Instagram page involved approximately 1,200,000 people and a 30% increase in followers.

Each social media has its own audience and its own language, and therefore, the posts are never the same. Even if we talk about stressful topics, the language used is different. The topics covered are never self-referential but the social team proposes posts that tell the life of the hospital with a continuous storytelling that shows the faces, eyes and hands of doctors and nurses during their work.

This mode is highly appreciated, as shown by the resulting constant growth of all their social pages.

This result convinced University Hospital of Cagliari to work on a new major project called Digital Audience Relations Office, a structure provided by the Italian State in all public administrations and is often a place where citizens complain about the malfunctioning of public offices. The University Hospital of Cagliari has transformed it into a public space where citizens and the hospital meet, where you can ask and have information or solutions to your problems in real time every day and all year round.

The University Hospital of Cagliari has not only created a comfortable environment to welcome citizens but also a software that allows all citizens to obtain all the information they need wherever they are located.

In such communication platform, the orientation to the solution of problems, to the relationship and to the constant attention to the citizens is the most powerful element.

The goal is to create a community with mutual trust and understanding, which helps to improve the quality of work and care. Healthworkers work more serenely and citizens gain the feeling of being heard and welcomed by the hospital.

2. World 2: From stereotypes to discrimination

As part of the Oltre European project, we gained the opportunity to analyse and reflect on how stereotypes on second-generation Muslim girls come into play both to simplify the reality we believe we are observing and to label and stigmatise that group. We then attempted to identify the pre-existing stereotypes in the collective imagination and practise ways to flank them with ideas and images of an opposite sign.

The stereotype is a cognitive process that comes into play when we need to grasp a portion of reality in a simplified way. Stereotype has its roots in the collective imagination, at times latching on to images and representations of other groups and themes and at other times remaining on the surface without any contact with factual reality.

Examples of the first type are those that place all those who 'seem' foreigners indiscriminately alongside a potential danger because they are different culturally and in other ways. Examples of the second type are those that arise from generic 'hearsay' that remains on the surface due to the lack of relations of real knowledge.

In both cases, we have a simplification that often leads first to a trivialisation and then, without any critical capacity, leads to a stratification of stereotyped ideas and images that feed individual and, above all, collective prejudices.

In the collective imagination, many groups, often minorities, are thought of through stereotypes. In our evaluations and decisions, it is precisely stereotypes that guide us and not the real knowledge of people. This leads to social injustice, conflict and in the most serious cases, radicalisation.

Second-generation young people of the Muslim religion are the object of both stereotyping processes: they are foreigners because, although born in Italy, their parents are foreigners and, at times, they have 'seemingly' different skin colour, somatic features or ways of dressing (e.g. the veil for girls). They are also the subject of 'hearsay', such as when someone calls them terrorists because attacks in other countries and situations have been carried out by second-generation young Muslims.

The double discrimination resulting from these stereotyping also adds to the difficult condition of being bridges (in the best of cases) or in the middle of two cultures: the Italian and that of their parents' origin. In this case, the stereotypes can be derived, for example, from relatives who have remained in their countries and who label them as different from their own culture.

_____

Clearly, discrimination acts heavily on the individual identities of second-generation young people, generating psychological problems, separations, conflicts and, unfortunately in some cases, radicalisation.

How is it possible to imagine ways of counteracting this role of stereotypes and prejudices?

One of the ways we have followed is to co-construct participatory communication spaces where ideas, images and even stereotypes can be compared between second-generation youth and their peers. To carry out this goal, we have promoted the protagonism of people who are 'carriers' of diversity and stereotypes together with others to delve deep into collective imaginaries about the characteristics of pre-existing stereotypes. These spaces allow us to imagine first and then realise media products and narratives that are capable of showing other points of view and perceptions. These media may never be able to replace existing stereotypes and prejudices, but if offered in quality and quantity, can stratify other ways of seeing and thinking in the collective imagination. At the end of the project, we certainly cannot say that we have changed the collective imagination, but rather we have learned a new way of constructing communication that counters stereotypes. For this endeavour to have visible effects, to provide continuity in quality and quantity to media products and narratives is necessary and to offer a ritual in their fruition that allows diversity to become 'normal'.

3. World 3: Newand deliberate metaphors to break conventional schemas

Among the cases that indirectly show how much our individual perspectives are social construction, built on our cognitive processes, metaphors are a litmus paper.

In a general sense, linguists and philosophers of language agree on the idea that language, thought and action are strictly related (Sapir 1929). In addition, cognitive scientists (Fodor 1975), psychologists (Pinker 1994/2007) and anthropologists (Whorf 1940) have maintained that language and thought interact significantly in many ways. However, still we have no ultimate answer:

> The idea that different languages may influence thinking in different ways has been present in many cultures and has given rise to many philosophical treatises. Because it is so difficult to pin down effects of a particular language on a particular thought pattern, this issue remains unresolved.[2]

Although this problem is debated from an empirical and individual perspective, a general agreement revolves around the fact that words and signs are interlaced and have an impact on conceptual representation, language and media. This agreement can be observed in very special semantic and pragmatic phenomena: metaphors.

A metaphor is a linguistic and cognitive structure in which two domains interact to generate new meaning. One of the domains is more familiar and play the role of the base for a projection onto a domain that most of the time is more abstract or less known. For example, in the Bohr model of the atom as a tiny solar system, the former is the target domain while the latter is the source domain. The solar system was well known by scientists at the time when they were trying to understand atomic physics, and the above metaphor has been a helpful starting point of the scientific progress that ended up creating the quantum mechanics. Nowadays, we know that the Bohr model of the atom was incorrect, but the concept of tiny solar systems has captured the

_____

[2] Bernard Comrie, "Language and Thought," Linguistics Society of America, accessed 18 January 2022, https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/language-and-thought.

_____

imagination of many people and is in any case the foundation of several hypotheses that are still under evaluation.

To show how metaphors can serve as the acid test of hypothesis that language and thought are strictly dependent on each other, we consider the conceptual metaphors on the one hand and deliberate metaphors on the other.

Conceptual metaphors are cognitive structures that frame our knowledge at various levels. Primary metaphors shape our first conceptualisations, starting from the physical interactions between our body and the environment in which we experience forces, power, movements, and resistance. These cases include orientation metaphors, an example of which is when we consider that we make progress when we are going ahead; the orientation metaphor's schema is grounded on the fact that we walk moving ahead because of the position of our eyes. We find the same strong relationship in cases in which the ground is not as constrained from the biological and physical world, but mainly depends on anthropological history.

We conceptualise many of our cultural and social relationship in terms of war:

> 'Words are weapons in this verbal combat: sharp-tongued people make cutting remarks, for example, and sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me seems to be a formulaic attempt to assert the metaphorical rather than literal status of such weapons'. (Sweetser 1992: p. 713)

Language and its symbolic strength shape the world view of learners and the way in which they think and act. Metaphors frame the understanding and interpretation of what we call reality.

> 'A commonly seen conceptual metaphor is 'argument is war'. This metaphor shapes our language in the way we view argument as a battle to be won. In debates, teams 'attack' the weak points of their opponents' arguments, and in the end one team 'wins' and the other 'loses'. These metaphors are not only prevalent in our language, but we perceive and act in accordance with them'.[3]

This phenomenon is not limited to metaphors and is called a 'framing effect', a process that essentially involves selection and salience:

> 'To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. (Entman 1993: 52)

The concept of 'war' has been used as source domain of metaphors for many target domains: argument, sports, politics, health and, more recently, the pandemic. Given its framing power, many scholars suggest not to use it. For example, many authors suggest not to use it to encourage cancer patients or to prevent cancer disease, because of its ineffectiveness and even harmful results (REF). As for the storytelling of the literal and real world, Lakoff showed the danger of representing all the war scenario with heroes, victims and rescue, when the object of the narration is an actual war. In the paper, *Metaphor and war: the metaphor system used to justify war in the gulf* (1991), Lakoff examines the newspaper narration and concludes that:

_____

[3] https://strengtheningthecore.wordpress.com/145-2/

_____

> 'Metaphors can kill. The use of a metaphor with a set of definitions becomes pernicious when it hides realities in a harmful way. It is important to distinguish what is metaphorical from what is not. Pain, dismemberment, death and starvation are not metaphorical; they are real, and in a war they afflict hundreds of thousands of real human beings whether Iraqi, Kuwaiti or American'.(Lakoff 1991: p. 32)

Nevertheless, we cannot avoid metaphors; we can only 'resist'[4] them and/or select different ones. To do that, we have to adopt different, deliberate, creative metaphors that can have an impact on the people substituting the conventional metaphors. For example, we can substitute the war with a journey metaphor to speak about cancer, arguments can be seen as dances in which each person contributes to end up in a coordinated reasoning, and human «memory is not a storage place but a story we tell ourselves in retrospect» (Shpancer 2010: 38).

In conclusion, both conventional and deliberate/creative metaphors shape the world, the way in which we represent it, and both frame our thinking and actions. However, only deliberate uses of creative metaphors can promote a reframing, through counter narratives, to promote changes for a better society.

The articles collected in this volume are all examples of the mechanisms discussed in this introductory section. Such research effectively shows the porous boundary zone in which collective and historically institutionalised representations, retroact on the individual beliefs and social behaviours. To classify them in one of the three cases is difficult, precisely because the three worlds are always strictly interlaced, as we saw also in our case studies. However, we seek to identify the world that best represents the starting point of the studies presented.

As representative of an approach that investigates reality more directly than the others, we consider the papers *Manifestation of Panic in Mass Media: COVID-19 Case in Lithuania*, by Miglė Eleonora Černikovaitė (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Creative Industries Faculty, Department of Creative Communication, Lithuania); *Post-experts in Polish Mainstream Media: Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Selected Information Programs*, by Guzik Aldona (Pedagogical University of Cracow/Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Poland) and *From 'Authenticity' to 'iThenticity' – The Quest for Truth in a Post-Patriarchal World*, by Alessio Pisci (University of Cagliari, Italy).

Miglė Eleonora Černikovaitė indeed examines an effect of the Covid-19 pandemic in media, showing how a concrete phenomenon became a manifestation of panic because of media communication. Guzik Aldona uses quantitative and qualitative data and examines the special role of (post)experts have always played in society, a point of view that tends to see the reality more directly. Alessio Pisci goes under World 1 because of the focus on truth, even if he questionsits epistemological status of authenticity.

We consider the papers *Criticism on Computer Reason (Ciberculture). Modern and Contemporary Aspects of Jean Baudrillard's Thought* by Filippo Silvestri (Università degli Studi di Bari 'Aldo Moro') and *The Role of Intercultural Communication in the Formation of Language Competence* by Larisa Anatolyevna Kosareva (People's Friendship University of Russia, Russia) as good examples of the role of World 2.

Three papers that clearly orient their research starting from language or focusing on language mechanisms are as follows:

Languages and Symbols in Communicating COVID-19 in Sardinia (Italy) by Alice Guerrieri (University of Cagliari, Italy); *Corpus-Driven Approaches to the Representation of Pakistani*

_____

[4] See the project "Resistence to metaphor" directed by Gerard Steen (2016-2022) (https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/360-80-060)

_____

Culture in Newspapers' Blogs by Tehseen Zahra (Air University, Islamabad) and *The Role of Eye Contact in the Acquisition of Language: a Hypothesis* by Paola Pennisi (Department of Adult and Childhood Human Pathology 'Gaetano Barresi', University of Messina) and the research group constituted by Sebastiano Nucera (Department of Cognitive Sciences, University of Messina) and Francesco and Bruno Galletti (Department of Adult and Childhood Human Pathology 'Gaetano Barresi', University of Messina).

In her work, Alice Guerrieri studied the symbols used to represent Covid issues in Sardinia and showed how they are peculiar of a certain cultural area. Tehseen Zahra takes a corpus-driven approach, a method used more and more in linguistics and in the philosophy of language to study concepts classification and evolution, which examines the representation of Pakistani culture in a newspaper narration. By comparison, Paola Pennisi, Sebastiano Nucera, Francesco Galletti and Bruno Galletti examined a mechanism that allows the acquisition of language and eye contact.

In this volume, we present the papers in alphabetical order such that readers can imagine other interpretative paths and connections among the interesting arguments presented at the VI world conference on Media and Communication in Cagliari (online) on 17–19 June, 2021.

References

Entman, Robert M. (1993), «Framing: Toward clarification of a Fractured Paradigm», in *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), pp. 51–58.

Fodor, Jerry A. (1975), *The Language of Thought*, Crowell Press, Springfield.

Lakoff, G. (1991), «Metaphor And War: The Metaphor System Used To Justify War In The Gulf», in *Peace Research*, May 1991, Vol. 23, No. 2/3, pp. 25-32.

Pinker, Steven (2007), *The Language Instinct*, 2nd ed., Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York.

Popper, Karl (1975), *Conoscenza Oggettiva: Un Punto di Vista Evoluzionistico*, Armando Editore, Roma.

Putnam, H (1975), *Mind, Language, and Reality*, Harvard Un, Cambridge, Mass.

Sapir, Edward (1929), «The Status of Linguistics as a Science», in *Language* 4, pp. 207–14.

_____

Shpancer, N. (2010), *The Good Psychologist: A Novel*, Henry Holt and Co.

Sweetser, Eve E. (1992), «English Metaphors for Language: Motivations, Conventions, and Creativity», in *Poetics Today*, 13.4, pp. 705-24. JSTOR. Web. 10 Mar. 2012.
Tagliagambe, Silvano (1997), *Epistemologia del Confine*, Il Saggiatore, Milano.

Volterrani, A (2022), *Preventing Radicalisation in the Era of Deep Mediatization*, in E. Gola, M. Macaluso, M. Siino, G. Tumminelli, A. Volterrani, *The Co-Design of an Online Campaign for an Inclusive Community: Languages, Images and Participation*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholar Publisher.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee (1940), «Science and Linguistics», in *Technology Review*, 42, pp. 227–31, 247–8.