

## Short Communication

# The Communication of the Living: A Matter of Semiosis and Esthesia

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## Abstract

This article addresses communication as an expressive action of living organisms and from there it postulates aesthesis and semiosis as conditions of their emergence. Thus, it proposes an alternative definition to understand communication as a phenomenon and as a mechanism of and for life. In this sense, it is concluded that communication has an adaptive nature that allows survival and evolution. It starts from the positions of biosemiotics and inactivism to support this argument.

## Introduction

As I have pointed out in previous works (Romeu, 2018, 2019, 2021), from an ontic or concrete perspective, communication in living organisms can be understood as expression. There is no communication that does not express, that is, that does not go from the inside to the outside of the organism that carries it out, so it can be said that communication is always action. However, it must be said that communication is a motivated action because all action even unconscious presupposes the existence of an “incentive” that justifies the energy expenditure generated by the inside-out movement.

This effort of expression constitutes a kind of projection of what the organism is, of what it

feels and even of what it thinks; so that communication constitutes a behaviour through which organisms show themselves motivated in the world, it is say, they show up for something. From this perspective, communication constitutes an action of meaning and with meaning: of meaning because it expresses something and with meaning because it is motivated by something.

What does communication express and what motivates expression are questions that this text will try to answer, starting from understanding communication from its constitutive conditions: semiosis as a process of production and interpretation of signs and aesthesis as a condition of sensitivity of alive organisms. In the first case, we will echo the biosemiotics paradigm due to its understanding of life as a cognitive process,

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and in the second case we will base ourselves on the enactivist theories of cognition that incorporate the body and its sensory-motor dynamics in the production of knowledge. This will constitute an approach to the communicative phenomenon as an adaptive phenomenon, which is an approach that is far from the symbolic and culturalist epistemes from which communication is mostly studied today.

### **Communication and aesthesis: sensitivity as a vehicle for the production of meaning**

Esthesia is a condition of the sensible world, particularly the one inhabited by living organisms, organisms with a body. As Blanco (2006) points out, it is about establishing the presence of aesthesis in organisms that “feel” insofar as they have their own body. In this sense, “feeling” does not only imply feeling, but above all sensitivity, capacity or disposition to react sensibly, it means “sensing”. This is why aesthesis is a sine qua non condition of experience. Mandoki (2008) points out in this regard that esthesia is that condition of openness of the being to the world, of permeability or porosity of the being to the context in which it is immersed. For this reason, in esthesia the body is inescapable.

As Fontanille (2017) states, the body constitutes the significant form of the experience of presence. Thus, body and experience form an interdependent unit, since the experience does not occur outside the body, and the presence of the body itself is already an experience, an experience of the body in a situation. But as Merleau-Ponty (1985) points out, in the experience there is sense, meaning, so that it emerges from what is lived and perceived while the senses are irritated.

From the enactivist theory, condensed at the contemporary times in Varela's neurophenomenology, experience is a kind of

perception in action that produces knowledge. It is an embodied action from which the world and being emerge together (Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1997)). In this sense, cognition is anchored in the experience in which the body is involved. As stated by Blanco (2006), the enaction principle is based on the solidarity between sensation, perception, experience and action, which are the four conditions for the emergence of cognition and cognitive schemes.

The foregoing in addition to preventing the dissociation between being and environment, between subject and world allows us to understand cognition as a process of a sensitive nature that occurs from the body, as a body in movement in the environment. This implies assuming that esthesia takes place precisely as a condition of knowledge, from which sensible cognition emerges, that is, as a process of production of knowledge that is enabled from the sensitivity of being.

Seen in this way, sensitivity has the capacity to produce meaning, since cognition is nothing more than that mechanism that allows to provide the experience with a specific informational content, thus configuring the content of the experience as a signified experience. This meaning, of course, is not related to the symbolic or sociocultural meanings that are found in the historical world of human subjects, but rather it is about meanings that emerge, insofar as they are produced from the sensory-motor dynamics of the body which it is the dynamics of experience, of the vital relationship of being with its environment.

The foregoing supposes the existence of an internal “knowledge” in organisms, a knowledge that configures information not as a magnitude of the external world, but as the result of the sensory-motor interweaving between subject and environment. As Damasio (2015) expresses it well, this

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knowledge has adaptive functions because it allows the brain to learn about the states of the body and make decisions based on the survival and well-being of the organism in which it is installed; it is a constitutive knowledge of being itself, a knowledge that configures it as such .

It is this knowledge that the organism projects outwards through expression; hence, through communication, the being is shown both as a producer and as a bearer of those meanings. In this sense, communication is always sensitive, esthesical, since it is indissolubly linked to the body that produces it. And since there is no communication outside the body, there is no communication exempt from experience or from the content of the experience that it produces. It is said content that appears as the significant matter of communication because communication is expressive action, that is, it is action that is embodied from the body where the traces (material, objective) of the fabric of semiosis are revealed.

### **Communication and semiosis: the production and interpretation of signs as a support for expression**

From biosemiotics, semiosis is the very origin of life; it is, in fact, what living systems — including organisms do to live (Maldonado, 2020). As Maturana and Varela (2009) state, life is cognition since living systems are the result of cognitive processes. From this point of view, living systems incessantly interpret the environment as signs, since a good interpretation ensures adaptation and survival. This makes life and semiosis coextensive, as Sebeok (1994) stated, and also implicated in the epigenetic dimension of evolution.

In the midst of the incessant processes of change in the environment, a living system is one that manages to maintain its autonomy, which also requires incessant adaptation (Varela, 2000). This adaptation occurs to the

extent that they generate optimal mechanisms for the search for meaning, which is a perceptual-cognitive activity through which the organism regulates its experience in the world, meaning the world with which it interacts in order to survive (Di Paolo, 2015 ). In this sense, the production of information becomes the production and interpretation of signs.

These are signs that, unlike symbols (closed signs), are open, referential and self-referential; therefore, although they can be encrypted, in no case does this encoding imply the construction of a closed code. This is what allows us to affirm, together with Kauffman (1993), that to the extent that living systems "feel" the states of the world, this sensing supposes the production of codified information about the world always in relation to them. In this way, the expressive action that communication implies as a vital behavior becomes social communication.

The foregoing is clear in organisms that are not very complex at the cognitive level, where vital communication has little expressive variability, causing the codified information produced and interpreted from sensing produces in turn a finite number of meanings. In the case of human beings, the sociocultural factor is the one that imposes a lower range of expressive variability given the relevance it acquires in the processes of adaptation and survival as we are not only social beings, but also historical ones.

Thus, the production and interpretation of signs (which from biosemiotics does not have an anthropocentric foundation) configure the dynamics through which life is possible. Hoffmeyer (2009) points out in this regard that signs constitute the crucial factor in the study of living systems, so that it is the communication systems between them (processes that biosemiotics endorse as non-linear and non-rational), which opens the

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range of possibilities for evolution through adaptation. Consequently, biosemiotics understands communication as a codified relationship between signs that, even without being stable or closed, allows the interpretation of the environment as a process of production and interpretation of signals that are significant for the survival of living systems.

The foregoing is a bit different from the way in which communication is conceived here as an expressive action, because bio semioticians define communication as a codified system of signs that we can call expressions; however, to the extent that said system is not closed, but rather is defined polyphonically (Maldonado, 2020), communication acquires a dynamic character as it is supported by the differential nature of the processes of production and interpretation of signs. When speaking of living systems, biosemiotics speaks in turn of the existence of different languages that interact with each other creating a symbiosis between the biological, the physical and the cultural, which it also understands as communication.

In this way, communication is seen from biosemiotics as a semiosis, that is, as a process of production and interpretation of signs that are constantly encoded and decoded based on a greater and better adaptability of the living systems that produce it, even or above all rather, unconsciously and involuntarily. For this reason, for biosemiotics, communicative semiosis implies the production and interpretation of information as the production and interpretation of codified meanings that are dynamically and constantly intertwined through open codes that in turn allow their constant decoding.

For biosemioticians, communication is that process of perennial change that defines life through its unforeseen events, its instability and uncertainty, and as such it is separated from information. However, by emphasizing

semiosis as the foundation and vehicle of communication, it assumes information as raw material for expression. Thus, the expression emerges from semiosis as a process of production and interpretation of information as a process of encoding and decoding of meanings from which living organisms configure their world of meaning whose purpose is to achieve adaptation with a view to ensuring survival.

In this sense, although from biosemiotics to communicate is not to express, the absence of a phenomenological conception of cognition as from which communication as expressive action is explained here, does not prevent us from understanding that expression as motivated action is what activates sign activity, activity that in biosemiotic terms is necessary for the functioning of life. For this reason, it is possible to maintain that, ultimately, communication expresses the semiotic process on which it is based, because without it communication cannot be possible.

### **Esthesia and semiosis as emergency conditions of the communicative**

As has been seen, both esthesia and semiosis constitute the emergency conditions of the communicative understood as expressive action. Semiosis because it makes it possible to understand that there is no expression without meaning, esthesia because it teaches that expression is always sensitive.

These are conditions that start from different but complementary theoretical considerations, which allows us to offer a complex conception of communication at two levels or dimensions: the ontic dimension of phenomenological roots, and the ontological dimension of semiotic origin. The first contributes to thinking about communication from its adaptive nature by establishing its conditions of possibility in cognition, experience and the body; the second, on the other hand, gives way

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to an understanding of the role of communication in the emergence, development and preservation of life by considering its dynamic, multilevel and polyphonic character in the production and interpretation of signs. Thus, the semiotic process that constitutes communication explains its adaptive nature as an expressive action.

This allows us to conclude that esthesia and semiosis form part of a phenomenological unit where the specificity of the sensing is integrated into the more general processes of the semiosis. For this reason, it is possible to affirm that the metatheoretical description made by biosemiotics around communication as semiosis integrates the explanation around the cognitive support of the sensitive experience from which communication derives as an expressive action.

In short: when speaking of communication as a phenomenon of life, arbitrarily limiting life—as has been done here—to what is known as the animated world, the living can only be known to be alive if it lives—in the terms that Ingold (2000) assumes inhabiting—an environment or environment from the corporeal or material, establishing the communicative in the expression of that fabric of sensing and cognition that is essential both to contribute to the academic debate on the materiality of the sign and the meaning, and to understand to communication as behavior, that is, as a motivated action that projects the feelings and/or thoughts of the organisms that carry it out.

This supposes these organisms as agents that do things in the world, which implies understanding communication as the expressive matrix of this doing, both in semiotic terms where the production and interpretation of signs constitutes the process through which they are expressed as part of the living; as from the esthesia point of view in

which sensitivity constitutes the starting point for this process of production and interpretation of signs to be constituted motivated and interested from the experiential in the material and/or corporeal foundation of expressive action as action of the to live.

For this reason, it is possible to conclude that communication expresses the being in its process of living, so that this expression is motivated by the life experience of the being in the world, an experience that is above all sensitive, so its expression is necessarily contingent. given its dynamic and interested nature. This is what defines communication as an expressive behavior, and it is also what allows it to be conceived within the adaptive and evolutionary processes within which the cultural and the social are explained in their perennial interrelation with the natural.

Thus, from biosemiotics and enactivist considerations it has been possible to generate an ontological reflection on communication that supposes an alternative to the sociological and anthropocentric approaches in which the study of this vital phenomenon that is communication is usually encapsulated academically.

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