

COMMUNICATION AS INTERACTION IN SYNERGY WITH UNCERTAINTY

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Introduction

Communication is a manifestation of life. The stunning diversity and spontaneity of life-events are continuously revealed through communication. Life starts with communication and ends when the ability to communicate ceases. In between these two points, **uncertainty** is an inevitable companion of any communication process.

Everyday communication is deeply rooted in people's experience stored up in the form of instincts, memory, behavioural patterns, various conceptual and emotional associations. Human experience can be individual as well as a common inheritance and, as long as this inheritance predominates, communication is essentially about the past. No wonder that people's anticipation and predictions are mere extrapolations and projections of their past experiences into future time intervals. By projecting the past into the future, communication intends to reduce the effect of uncertainty about the future. In doing so, the communication process resembles the approach of contemporary science aimed mainly at reducing the uncertainty in human knowing.

When describing uncertain phenomena and processes, science uses fuzzy and probabilistic models based on 'objective' information from the past. When describing uncertain life-events, communication uses habitual and associative thinking based on 'subjective' information from the past.

In artificial (human-made) systems, both fuzzy and probabilistic modeling work perfectly. Using these types of modeling, bewildering virtual realities and future scenarios can be generated by computers. Unfortunately, in human communication, habitual and associative reactions generate repetition and triviality. Repetition and triviality are the price paid for the human endeavour to reduce uncertainty and make the flow of life predictable. But is it possible to impose predictability on the flow of life-events?

Statement: *The flow of life is inherently unpredictable.*

The proof of this statement easily derives from the **self-referentiality** of human life - humans are both creators and products of their life. If an event x is predicted to take place in some future moment, say $(t+n)$, of the flow of life of an individual i (or a group of individuals g), the individual i (or the group g) is free to make decisions and act (at the moments between t and $t+n$) in such a way that instead of x , another event, say y , will ensue.

Corollary: *To predict the flow of life of an individual (or a group of individuals) is possible if, and only if, the freedom of the individual (or the group) to make decisions and act has been highly restricted.*

The endeavour for certainty and predictability expressed in communication strongly affects our human freedom to make decisions and act. Obviously, *the more certain and predictable people's behaviour, the less free they are*. Slaves follow orders - there is no uncertainty in orders, only 'pure certainty' demanding pre-established reactions. Those who follow pre-established patterns of behaviour dictated by dogmas and doctrines, prejudices and stereotypes, habits and norms, do not much differ from slaves - their freedom to explore and make sense of the uncertainty of life is essentially restricted. Fixed 'optimal' solutions and 'best' strategies, pre-given directives and imposed goals - they all are designed to fight uncertainty. In this fight an inevitable victim is the freedom to think and act.

The Flux of Uncertainty

It is the *flux of uncertainty* that permanently opens a free space for changes and evolution of human thoughts and feelings, values and beliefs, aspirations and endeavours [1,2] . Moreover, uncertainty is the major propelling force of **creativity**. Without being supported by uncertainty, creativity withers. Without being supported by creativity, the communication process becomes trivial and meaningless.

Creative communication is a complex dynamic process, in which the physical, emotional and mental characteristics of communicators are inseparably tangled together.

We introduce the notion of a *vortex of communication* in order to emphasize both this unique inseparability and the emergence of new meaning in any creative communication process.

The study of fluid dynamics shows [3,4] that the sucking 'self-organizing' force at the centre of a vortex cannot appear unless the participating streams (e.g., masses of running water, turbulent airs, etc.) are:

- (1) permanently in motion, that is, in an *out-of-equilibrium* state, and
- (2) intensively interacting with each other through various *feedback loops*.

The streams of thoughts and feelings, expectations and hope, intentions and aspirations, expressed in verbal or non-verbal ways, are involved in the dynamics of human communication. Instead of the sucking force of a maelstrom or a tornado, the *self-organising force of meaning-creation* arises from the vortex of communication.

We call the meanings emerging from the vortex of communication *living meanings*. They are unknown before the act of their emergence. They are meanings in dynamics - not settled once for ever, not imposed from outside the vortex, but born from within the vortex and impregnated by its whirling 'energies'.

One can find many examples of so called 'trivial communication', where no meaning is created. In those examples, the thoughts and feelings, expressed in communication process, seem to be in a kind of 'standstill' - without intellectual or emotional drive and zeal. As usual, any once-for-ever adopted behavioural pattern, any habit and stereotype, as well as any 'borrowed'-from-outside viewpoint and argument, intends to impose frozen patterns in the space of human thoughts and feelings.

The vortices in communication cannot be formed by meanings already known to the communicators. The already known meanings bring forth either a passive 'groupthink' (manifested in the former East-European communist societies) or exhaustive competition (manifested in the present Western democracies).

It is the *unknown* reflected in existential *uncertainty* that

- pulls people towards creative discussions, debates, negotiation.
- makes people's thoughts and feelings flow and move out of the frozen zones of equilibrium (no matter how desirable, suitable and comfortable these zones might appear at first sight), and not to be trapped into the standstill of any pre-selected, 'scientifically'-proved or simply taken-for-granted mental or emotional patterns.
- interconnects different and even entirely opposite opinions and beliefs - either through various feedback interactions or through complementarity.
- transforms communication from a mere information exchange into a creative search for meaning.

The **unknown**, felt and experienced in different ways by different individuals, serves as a powerful catalyst for the formation of communication vortices.

Interaction in Synergy with Uncertainty

Chaos theory is certain about inevitable uncertainty embedded in complex processes: because of this uncertainty, we cannot say much about their long-term development [4,5,6]. So interwoven and tangled are the factors influencing creative communication that it is hard to predict their dynamics. We cannot predict any single moment of emergence of new meaning from turbidity of communication - such moments are in the captivity of the unknown. In order to let them free, and yet be aware of their approaching emergence, we need *to act in synergy with uncertainty*.

To act in synergy with uncertainty means:

- to disclose the time-dependent outwardness of social reality by breaking through the external, sensible, mental and phenomenal forms that we encounter in human experience.
- to facilitate human experience of the *living meaning* of the phenomena by gradually developing a subtle human perception of the forces underlying these phenomena.

This way of (inter)acting does not fight uncertainty. On the contrary, it acknowledges that any time we fight uncertainty in an attempt to reduce or eliminate it, we miss both the living meanings of life events and the right moments of action. This is what usually happens in life - we understand an event only after it has irreversibly passed in the spatio-temporal continuity, that is, when it is too late to undertake an adequate action in response to it.

Maturana and Varela's notion of structural coupling defined as 'recurrent interactions leading to structural congruence between two (or more) systems' [7, p.75] strongly resonates with our ideas of interacting in synergy with uncertainty.

A natural law which we call the ***Law of Emergence*** is at the basis of the interaction in synergy with uncertainty.

Law of Emergence: *The emergence of every phenomenon in human life is inevitably preceded by manifestations of subtle and yet perceivable vortical forces.*

The Law of Emergence is rooted in the chaotic (nonlinear) dynamics of complex systems. An emergence represents a kind of bifurcation (a sudden qualitative change) in the system's dynamics. Any nonlinear process (e.g., human life) is subject to bifurcations occurring as a result of tiny changes in its characteristic parameters. These tiny changes are caused by subtle forces preceding the act of emergence.

In human systems those subtle forces are perceivable as they are always embodied in some specific real vortices (e.g., clash of ideas, views, attitudes, cultures, feelings) constantly arising in the flow of every individual life. This is the reason for calling them *vortical forces*.

Insights for Practical Application

How to capture these subtle forces? How to filter their faint 'voices' from the thundering noise of all that whirling variety of ever-changing goals, objectives, requirements, constraints, expectations, emotional and mental constructs, which shape our everyday life?

The answer to these difficult questions is surprisingly simple: what needs to be done is to decrease the volume of the noise *inside us*. We cannot do much with the noise coming from outside - we have no power to stop its generation. What we are able to do is to try stopping its stressful penetration into our personal emotional and mental spaces - or at least, to significantly decrease the energy volume of the noise. There are many techniques available for this purpose. When the noise gradually evaporates, the feeble forces responsible for an approaching emergence become recognizable. So, the emergence by itself ceases to be an enigma. Then, and only then, it is the right moment to act in order to prevent any destructive spontaneity.

In communication, the destructive spontaneity usually relates to such phenomena as confrontation and alienation, animosity and adverseness, disrespect and hatred in human relationships. It is not too difficult to grasp the subtle forces leading towards emergence of breakdowns in communication - especially in our days, when massive amounts of human energy are drafted for use in extremely competitive, self-centered and selfish pursuits. What is not so easy to do is to notice the fragile forces in favour of human willingness to search for unity rather than separateness, cooperation rather than confrontation, dialogue and mutual respect rather than monologue and demonstration of power.

The old algorithm: *if there is a zone of overlap in communicators' opinions, build their consensus and cooperation on it*, does not work under to-day's conditions of social instability, uncertainty and criticality. Tiny perturbations in communication process can dramatically narrow the zone of overlap while widening the existing gaps. As a result the whole building of consensus can easily collapse.

The new algorithm for acting in synergy with uncertainty in communication practice can be described as follows:

(1) *Reveal the dynamics of differences on which the apparent contradictions in the communication process subsist.*

(2) Try to understand the inner forces (however tiny and insignificant they seem to appear) propelling the dynamics of differences.

(3) Try to answer the following questions: Which of the forces have a destructive character - moving towards a breakdown in communication? And which of them seem to be in favour of moving the flow of communication towards dialogue and cooperation?

(4) Gently nudge from within the communication vortex, so that the feeble unifying forces gradually become clearer and stronger.

The described algorithm can be adapted for application in facilitation and counseling practice, as well as in narrative therapy.

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