ON SYSTEMATICALLY DISTORTED COMMUNICATION

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In this, the first of two articles outlining a theory of communicative competence, the author shows how the requirements of such a theory are to be found in an analysis of the linguistic competence of a native speaker, but of systematic distortion of communication of the kind postulated by psychoanalytic theory. The psychoanalyst's hermeneutic understanding of incomprehensible acts and utterances depends on the explanatory power of this understanding, and therefore rests on theoretical assumptions. After a preliminary definition of the range of incomprehensible acts and utterances dealt with in psychoanalysis, the author presents an account of psychoanalysis as linguistic analysis. He then explicates the key theoretical assumptions underlying the analytical procedure, in particular those relating to the notion of 'scopic understanding', and concludes by indicating the place of explanatory understanding in a theory of communicative competence.

1. Where difficulties of comprehension are the result of cultural, temporal, or social distance, we can say in principle what further information we would need in order to achieve understanding: we know that we must decipher the alphabet, become acquainted with lexicon and grammar, or uncover context-specific rules of application. In attempting to explain unclear or incomprehensible meaning associations we are able to recognize, within the limits of normal communication, what it is that we do not — yet — know. However, this 'hermeneutic' consciousness of translation difficulties proves to be inadequate when applied to systematically distorted communication. For in this case incomprehensibility results from a faulty organization of speech itself. Obvious examples are those clearly pathological speech disturbances to be observed, for example, among psychotics. But the more important occurrences of the pattern of systematically distorted communication are those which appear in speech which is not conspicuously pathological. This is what we
encounter in the case of pseudo-communication, where the participants do not recognize any communication disturbances. Pseudo-communication produces a system of reciprocal misunderstandings which, due to the false assumption of consensus, are not recognized as such. Only a neutral observer notices that the participants do not understand one another. However, as long as we communicate in a natural language there is a sense in which we can never be neutral observers, simply because we are always participants. That is, and as I have argued elsewhere, any attempt to locate misunderstanding in communication is itself part of a further (or possibly the same) process of reciprocal communication, and therefore not the result of ‘observing’ such processes. The critical vantage-point can never be better than that of a partner in the communication. Consequently we have no valid criterion at our disposal for determining in general whether we are labouring under the mistaken conviction of normal understanding, and thus wrongly considering difficulties to be hermeneutically explicable when they actually require systematic analysis.

Freud dealt with the occurrence of systematically deformed communication in order to define the scope of specifically incomprehensible acts and utterances. He always envisaged the dream as the standard example of such phenomena, the latter including everything from harmless, everyday pseudo-communications and Freudian slips to pathological manifestations of neurosis, psychosis, and psychosomatic disturbance. In his essays on cultural theory, Freud broadened the range of phenomena which could be conceived as being part of systematically distorted communication. He employed the insights gained from clinical phenomena as the key to the pseudo-normality, that is to the hidden pathology of collective behaviour and entire social systems. In our discussion of psychoanalysis as a kind of linguistic analysis pertaining to systematically distorted communication, we shall first consider the example of neurotic symptoms.

Three criteria are available for defining the scope of specific incomprehensible acts and utterances. (a) On the level of language, distorted communication becomes noticeable because of the use of rules which deviate from the recognized system of linguistic rules. Particular semantical contents or complete semantical fields — in extreme cases the syntax too — may be affected thereby. Using dream texts, Freud examined, in particular, condensation, displacement, absence of grammaticality, and the use of words with opposite meaning. (b) On the behaviour level, the deformed language-game appears in the form of rigidity and compulsory repetition. Stereotyped behaviour patterns recur in situations involving stimuli which cause emotionally loaded reactions. This inflexibility is symptomatic of the fact that the semantical content has lost its specific linguistic independence of the situational context. (c) If, finally, we consider the system of distorted communication as a whole, we are struck by the discrepancy between the levels of communication; the usual congruency between linguistic symbols, actions, and accompanying gestures has disintegrated. The symptoms, in a clinical sense, offer nothing but the most recalcitrant and tangible proof of this dissonance. No matter on which level of communication the symptoms appear, whether in linguistic expression, in behavioural compulsion, or in the realm of gestures, one always finds an isolated content therein which has been excommunicated from the public language-performance. This content expresses an intention which is incomprehensible according to the rules of public communication, and which as such has become private, although in such a way that it remains inaccessible even to the author to whom it must, nevertheless, be ascribed. There is a communication obstruction in the self between the ego, which is capable of speech and participates in intersubjectively established language-games, and that ‘inner foreign territory’ (Freud), which is represented by a private or a primary linguistic symbolism.

2. Alfred Lorenzer has examined the analytical conversation between physician and patient from the standpoint of psychoanalysis as analysis of language. He considers the process by which the meanings of specific incomprehensible manifestations are decoded as an understanding of scenes linked by analogy to those in which the symptoms occur. The purpose of analytical interpretation is to explain the incomprehensible meaning of the symptomatic manifestations. Where neuroses are involved, these manifestations are part of a deformed language-game in which the patient ‘acts’: that is, he plays an incomprehensible scene by violating role-expectations in a strikingly stereotyped manner. The analyst tries to make the symptomatic scene understandable by associating it with analogous scenes in the situation of transference. The latter holds the key to the coded relation between the symptomatic scene, which the adult patient plays outside the doctor’s office, and an original scene experienced in early childhood. In the transference situation the patient forces the doctor into the role of the conflict-defined primary reference person. The doctor, in the
role of the reflective or critical participant, can interpret the transference situation as a repetition of early childhood experiences; he can thus construct a dictionary for the hidden idioms of meanings of the symptoms. 'Scenic understanding' is therefore based on the discovery that the patient behaves in the same way in his symptomatic scenes as he does in certain transference situations; such understanding aims at the reconstruction, confirmed by the patient in an act of self-reflection, of the original scene.

2.1. The re-established original scene is typically a situation in which the child has once suffered and repulsed an unbearable conflict. This repulsion is coupled with a process of desymbolization and the formation of a symptom. The child excludes the experience of the conflict-filled object from public communication (and at the same time makes it inaccessible to its own ego as well); it separates the conflict-laden portion of its memory of the object and, so to speak, desymbolizes the meaning of the relevant reference person. The gap which arises in the semantic field is then closed by employing an unquestionable symbol in place of the isolated symbolic content. This symbol, of course, strikes us as being a symptom, because it has gained private linguistic significance and can no longer be used according to the rules of public language. The analyst's scenic understanding establishes meaning equivalences between the elements of three patterns — the everyday scene, the transference scene, and the original scene — and solves the specific incomprehensible of the symptom; thus it assists in achieving resymbolization, that is, the re-entry of isolated symbolic contents into public communication. The latent meaning of the present situation becomes accessible when it is related to the unimpaired meaning of the original infantile scene. Scenic understanding makes it possible to 'translate' the meaning of the pathologically frozen communication pattern which had been hitherto unconscious and inaccessible to public communication.

2.2. If we consider everyday interpretation within the range of ordinary language or translation from one language into another, or trained linguistic analysis in general, all of them leading to hermeneutic understanding of initially incomprehensible utterances, then scenic understanding differs from that hermeneutic understanding because of its explanatory power. That is, the disclosure of the meaning of specific incomprehensible acts or utterances develops to the same extent as, in the course of reconstruction of the original scene, a clarification of the genesis of the faulty meaning is achieved. The what, the semantic content of a systematically distorted manifestation, cannot be 'understood' if it is not possible at the same time to 'explain' the why, the origin of the symptomatic scene with reference to the initial circumstances which led to the systematic distortion itself. However, understanding can only assume an explanatory function, in the strict meaning of the word, if the semantic analysis does not depend solely on the trained application of the communicative competence of a native speaker, as is the case with simple semantic analysis, but is in fact even partially guided by theoretical propositions.

Two considerations indicate that scenic understanding is based on hypotheses which are in no way to be derived from the natural competence of a native speaker. In the first place, scenic understanding is linked to a special design of communication. The fundamental analytic rule introduced by Freud ensures a standard relationship between the physician and his patient, a relationship which meets quasi-experimental conditions. Suspension of the usual restraints of social reality and free association on the part of the patient, along with purposely restrained reactions and reflective participation on the part of the doctor, assure the achievement of a transference situation, which can then serve as a framework for translation. Secondly, the analyst's pre-understanding is directed at a small sampling of possible meanings, at the conflict-disturbed early object-relationships. The linguistic material which results from conversations with the patient is classified according to a narrowly circumscribed context of possible double meanings. This context comprises a general interpretation of early-childhood patterns of interaction. Both considerations make it obvious that scenic understanding — in contrast to hermeneutic understanding, or ordinary semantic analysis — cannot be conceived as being a mere application of communicative competence, free from theoretical guidance.

3. The theoretical propositions on which this special kind of language analysis is implicitly based can be elicited from three points of view. (1) The psychoanalytically structured distortion of non-distorted ordinary communication; (2) the attribution of the systematic distortion of communication to the confusion of two developmentally following phases of prelinguistic and linguistic symbol-organization; and (3) to explain the origin of deformation he employs a theory of
deviant socialization which includes the connection between patterns of interaction in early childhood and the formation of personality structures. I would like to consider these three aspects briefly.

3.1. The first set of theoretical propositions concerns the structural conditions which must be met if normal communication is to obtain.

(a) In the case of a non-deformed language-game there is a congruency on all three levels of communication. Linguistic expressions, expressions represented in actions, and those embodied in gestures do not contradict one another, but rather supplement one another by meta-communication. Intended contradictions which have some informational content, are normal in this sense. Furthermore, ordinary communication implies that a particular portion of extraveral meanings must be convertible into verbal communication.

(b) Normal communication conforms to intersubjectively recognized rules; it is public. The communicated meanings are identical for all members of the language-community. Verbal utterances are constructed according to the valid system of grammatical rules and are conventionally applied to specific situations. For extraveral expressions, which are not grammatically organized, there is likewise a lexicon which varies socioculturally within certain limits.

(c) In the case of normal speech the speakers are aware of the categorical difference between subject and object. They differentiate between outer and inner speech and separate the private from the public world. The differentiation between being and appearance depends, moreover, on the distinction between the language-sign, its significative content (significatum), and the object which the symbol denotes (referent, denotatum). Only on this basis is it possible to apply situationally non-dependent language symbols (decontextualization). The speaking subject will master the distinction between reality and appearance to the same extent as speech attains a distinct reality for him, distinct, that is, from the denoted objects and their meanings as well as from private experiences.

(d) In normal communication an intersubjectivity of mutual understanding, guaranteeing ego-identity, develops and is maintained in the relation between individuals who acknowledge one another. On the one hand, the analytic use of language allows the identification of objects (thus the categorization of particular items, the subordination of elements under classes, and the inclusion of sets). On the other hand, the reflexive use of language assures a relationship between the speaking subject and the language community which cannot be sufficiently presented by the analytic operations mentioned. For a world on the level of which subjects maintain mutual existence and understanding solely by virtue of their ordinary communication, intersubjectivity is not a universal according to which the individuals could be classified in the same way as elements are subordinated to their classes. On the contrary, the relation between I (ego), you (alter-ego), and we (ego and alter-ego) is established only by an analytically paradoxical achievement: the speaking persons identify themselves at the same time with two incompatible dialogueroles and thereby ensure the identity of the I (ego) as well as of the group. The one being (ego) asserts his absolute non-identity in relation to the other being (alter-ego); at the same time, however, both recognize their identity inasmuch as each acknowledges the other as being an ego, that is, a non-replaceable individual who can refer to himself as 'I'. Moreover, that which links them both is a mutual factor (we), a collectivity, which in turn asserts its individuality in relation to other groups. This means that the same paradoxical relationship is established on the level of intersubjectively linked collectives as holds between the individuals.

The specific feature of linguistic intersubjectivity exists in the fact that individuated persons communicate on the basis of it. In the reflexive use of language we present inalienably individual aspects in unavoidably general categories in such a way that we meta-communicatively comment upon and sometimes even revoke direct information (and confirm it only with reservations). We do this for the purpose of an indirect representation of the non-identical aspects of the ego, aspects which are not sufficiently covered by the general determinations and yet cannot be manifestly represented other than by just these determinations. The analytical use of language is necessarily embedded in the reflexive use, because the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding cannot be maintained without reciprocal self-representation on the part of the speaking subjects. Inasmuch as the speaker masters this indirect information on the meta-communicative level, he differentiates between essence and appearance. The understanding we come to about objects can be direct, but the subjectivity we encounter when we speak with one another remains, in direct information, only at the level of appearance. The categorial meaning of this kind of indirect communication, in which the indefinable individualized aspect of a person is expressed, and his claim upon individuality is
maintained, is something we merely reify in the ontological concept of essence. In fact this essence exists only in its appearances.

(e) Finally, normal speech is distinguished by the fact that the sense of substance and causality, of space and time, is differentiated according to whether these categories are applied to the objects within a world or to the linguistically constituted world itself, which allows for the mutuality of speaking subjects. The interpretational schema, 'substance', has a different meaning for the identity of items which can be clearly categorized analytically from that which it has for speaking and interacting subjects themselves, whose ego-identity, as has been shown, just cannot be grasped by analytically clear-cut operations. The interpretational schema of causality, when applied to observable events, leads to the concept of 'cause'; when it is applied to an association of intentional actions it leads to the concept of 'motive'. In the same way 'space' and 'time' undergo a different schematism when viewed in regard to physically measurable properties of observable events from that which they undergo when viewed according to experienced interactions. In the first case the categories serve as a system of coordinates for observation controlled by the success of instrumental action: in the latter case the categories serve as a frame of reference for the experience of social space and historical time from a subjective point of view.

3.2. The second set of postulates concerns the connection between two genetically successive phases of human symbol-organization.

(a) The archaic symbol-organization, which resists the transformation of its contents into grammatically regulated communication, can only be disclosed on the basis of the data of speech pathology and by means of the analysis of dream material. Here we mean symbols which control interactions, and not just signs, for these symbols already represent interactional experiences. Otherwise, however, the level of palaeosymbols lacks all the characteristics of normal speech. Palaeosymbols do not fit into a system of grammatical rules. They are not classified elements and do not appear in sentences which could be transformed grammatically. For this reason, the way in which these symbols function has been compared to the functional manner of analogue computers in contrast to that of digital computers. Freud had already noticed the lack of logical connections in his dream analyses. He draws attention particularly to the use of words with opposite meaning, a remnant on the linguistic level of the genetically earlier peculiarity of combining logically incompatible meanings. Prelinguistic symbols are emotionally loaded and remain fixed to particular scenes. There is no dissociation of linguistic symbol and bodily gesture. The connection to a particular context is so strong that the symbol cannot vary independently of actions. Although the palaeosymbols represent a prelinguistic basis for the intersubjectivity of mutual existence and shared action, they do not allow public communication in the strict sense of the word. For the identity of meaning is not yet granted and the private meaning-associations still prevail. The privatism of prelinguistic symbol-organization, so striking in all forms of speech pathology, originates in the fact that the usual distance between sender and addressee, as well as the differentiation between symbolic signs, semantic content, and items of reference, has not yet been developed. The distinction between reality and appearance, between the public and the private sphere cannot yet be clearly differentiated with the help of palaeosymbols (adualism).

Finally, prelinguistic symbol-organization does not allow an analytically satisfying categorization of the objects experienced. Two types of deficiencies are found in the communication and thought disturbances of psychotics: namely 'amorphous' and 'fragmented' speech disorders. In both cases the analytic operations of classification are disturbed. In the first, a fragmentation of structure is apparent which does not allow disintegrated single elements to be compiled into classes according to general criteria. In the second, an amorphous structure appears which does not allow aggregates of superficially similar and vaguely compiled things to be analysed. Symbol usage is not altogether destroyed, but the inability to form class hierarchies and to identify elements of classes offers, in both cases, proof of the breakdown of the analytical use of language. However, the second variation allows the possibility of achieving an archaic class-formation with the aid of prelinguistic symbols. And in any case we find so-called primary classes on early ontogenetic and historical levels, as well as in pathological cases; that is, classes that are not formed on the abstract basis of the identity of properties, but where the aggregates contain concrete items which, irrespective of their identifiable properties, are coordinated within an all-embracing association of motives, interpreted on the basis of subjective plausibility. Animistic Weltanschauungen, for example, are formed in accordance with such primary classes.

(b) The symbol-organization described here, which precedes language
genetically, is a theoretical construct. We cannot observe it anywhere. But the psychoanalytical decoding of systematically distorted communication presupposes such a construction, because that special type of semantic analysis introduced here as 'acetic understanding' resolves confusions of ordinary speech by interpreting them either as forced regression back to an earlier level of communication, or as the breakthrough of the earlier form of communication into language. On the basis of the analyst's experience with neurotic patients, we can, as has been shown, recognize the function of psychoanalysis as language analysis, in so far as it allows separated symbolic contents, which lead to a private narrowing of public communication, to be reintegrated into common linguistic usage. The performance of the analyst in putting an end to the process of inhibition serves the purpose of resymbolization; inhibition itself can therefore be understood as a process linked to desymbolization. The defence mechanism of inhibition, which is analogous to flight, is revealed by the patient in his resistance to plausible interpretations made by the analyst. This mechanism is an operation carried on with and by language; otherwise it would not be possible to reverse the process of repulsion hermeneutically, i.e. precisely by means of a special type of semantic analysis. The fleeing ego, which has to submit to the demands of outer reality in a conflict situation, hides itself from itself by eliminating the symbolic representation of unwanted demands of instinct from the text of its everyday consciousness. By means of this censorship the representation of the prohibited object is excommunicated from public communication and banished to the archaic level of palaeosymbols. Moreover, the assumption that neurotic behaviour is controlled by palaeosymbols, and only subsequently rationalized by a substitutive interpretation, offers an explanation for the characteristics of this behaviour pattern: for its pseudo-communicative function, for its stereotyped and compulsive form, for its emotional load and expressive content, and, finally, for its rigid fixation upon particular situations.

If inhibition can be understood as desymbolization, then it follows that there must be a correspondingly linguistic interpretation for the complementary defence mechanism, which does not turn against the self but rather against outer reality, i.e. for projection and denial. While in the case of inhibition the language-game is deformed by the symptoms formed in place of the excommunicated symbols, the distortion in the case of this defence mechanism results directly from the uncontrolled penetration of palaeosymbolic derivatives into language. In this case the therapeutic type of language analysis doesn't aim at re-transforming the desymbolized content into linguistically articulated meaning, but aims rather at a consciously achieved excommunication of the intermingled prelinguistic elements.

In both cases the systematic distortion can be explained by the fact that palaeosymbolically fixed semantic contents have encysted themselves, like foreign bodies, into the grammatically regulated use of symbols. Language analysis has the duty of dissolving this syndrome, i.e. of isolating the two language levels. There is, however, a third case: the processes of the creative extension of language. In this case a genuine integration is accomplished. The palaeosymbolically fixed meaning-potential is then brought into the open and is thus made available for public communication. This transfer of semantic contents from the prelinguistic into the common stock of language widens the scope of communicative action as it diminishes that of unconsciously motivated action. The moment of success in the use of creative language is a moment of emancipation.

The joke, although a different case, sheds light upon this process of creative language-extension. The laugh with which we react almost compulsively to what is comic in the joke contains the liberating experience which results when one moves from the level of palaeosymbolic thought to the level of linguistic thought. It is the revealed ambiguity of a text which is funny, an ambiguity which exists because it tempts us to regress to the level of prelinguistic symbolism, i.e. to confuse identity and similarity, and at the same time convinces us of the mistake of this regression. The laugh is one of relief. The joke lets us repeat virtually and experimentally the dangerous passage across the archaic border between prelinguistic and linguistic communication. In our reaction to it we assure ourselves of the control which we have attained over the dangers of a developmental stage of consciousness which we have overcome.

3. Psychoanalysis, which interprets the specific incomprehensibility of systematically distorted communication, can no longer strictly speaking be conceived according to the translation model which applies to simple hermeneutic understanding or ordinary semantic analysis. For the obscurities which controlled 'translation' from prelinguistic symbolism to language does away with are ones which arise not within the scope defined by a given language-system, but rather within language itself. Here it is the very structure of communication...
the basis of all translation, that we are concerned with. Semantic analysis of this special type therefore needs a systematic pre-understanding which pertains to language and linguistic communication as such, while on the other hand our ordinary semantic analysis proceeds _ad hoc_ from a traditionally determined pre-understanding which is tested and revised within the process of interpretation. The theoretical propositions deal, as described, with the preconditions of normal communication, with two levels of symbol organization, and with the mechanism of speech disorder. These theoretical assumptions can be organized in the structural model.

The constructions of ‘ego’ and ‘id’ interpret the analyst’s experiences in his encountering the resistance of his patients. ‘Ego’ is the instance which fulfills the function of reality-testing and of censorship. ‘Id’ is the name given to those parts of the self that are isolated from the ego and whose representations become accessible in connection with the processes of repression and projection. The ‘id’ is expressed indirectly by the symptoms which close the gap which develops in everyday language when desymbolization takes place; direct representation of the ‘id’ is found in the illusory palaeosymbolic elements dragged into the language by projection and denial. Now, the same clinical experience which leads to the construction of an ego- and id-instance, shows also that the defense mechanisms usually work unconsciously. For this reason Freud introduced the category of ‘superego’: an ego-foreign instance which is formed out of detached identifications with the expectations of primary reference persons. All three categories — ego, id, and superego — reflect fundamental experiences typical of a systematically distorted communication. The dimensions established by id and superego for the personality structure correspond to the dimensions of deformation of the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding in informal communication. So the structural model which Freud introduced as the categorial frame of metapsychology can be reduced to a theory of deviant communicative competence.

4. I have chosen psychoanalysis as my example in order to differentiate between two types of interpretation and two forms of communication.

From the viewpoint of a logic of explanation, this example of the semantic analysis of specific incomprehensible manifestations is of interest because, in a unique way, it affords simultaneous hermeneutic understanding and causal explanation. The analyst’s understanding owes its explanatory power — as we have seen — to the fact that the clarification of a systematically inaccessible meaning succeeds only to the extent to which the origin of the faulty or misleading meaning is explained. The reconstruction of the original scene makes both possible at the same time: the reconstruction leads to an understanding of the meaning of a deformed language-game and simultaneously explains the origin of the deformation itself. Of course, the connection between semantic analysis and causal explanation doesn’t become evident until one shows that the categorial framework of the theory used — in our case the Freudian metapsychology — is based on an at least implicitly underlying language theory. I have outlined only some of the assumptions which extend to the structure of normal communication and to the mechanisms of systematic distortion of communication. These assumptions would have to be developed within the framework of a theory of communicative competence, which is lacking as of now.

I can sum up my thesis as follows. The common semantic analysis of incomprehensible utterances, which leads to hermeneutic understanding, makes use of the non-analysed communicative competence of a native speaker. On the other hand, the special type of semantic analysis which deals with manifestations of a systematically distorted communication and affords an explanatory understanding, presupposes a theory of communicative competence. It is only in virtue of an at least implicit hypothesis concerning the nature and the acquisition of communicative competence that explanatory power can be accorded to this (particular) semantic analysis.

I am well aware that the logical analysis of what I call explanatory understanding should actually begin at this point. I must forget this at present. However, in a second paper (forthcoming in this journal), I shall make some introductory remarks on a theory of communicative competence. I believe that it is this theory which also provides the solid basis needed for present-day sociology.

NOTES