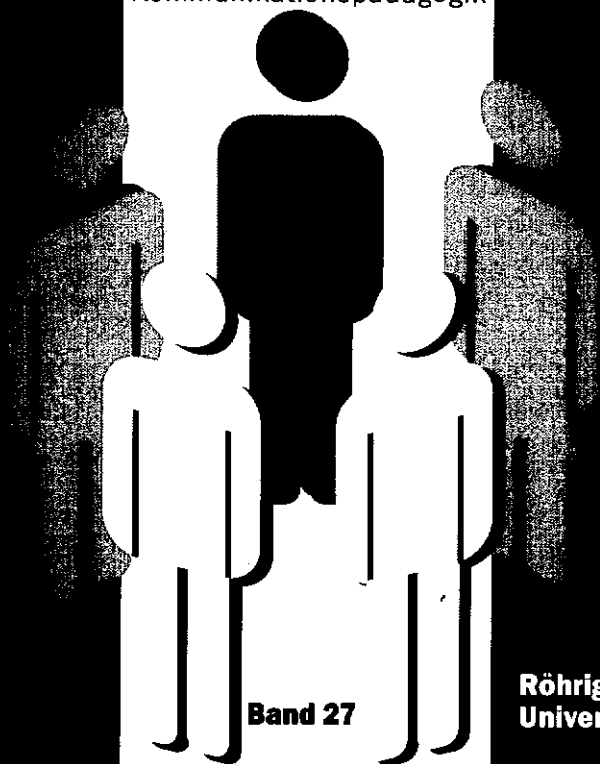Elizabeth C. Fine /
Bernd Schwandt (Eds.)

Applied Communication in Organizational and International Contexts

SPRECHEN & VERSTEHEN

Schriften zur
Kommunikationstheorie und
Kommunikationspädagogik

Band 27

Röhrig
Universitätsverlag

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The Conversational Space

1. "Space" as basic metaphor in the metapragmatic discourse of everyday communication

In everyday reflections on communicative events and experiences, the metaphor of space plays an important role. We rely on this metaphor in describing a lot of different communicative experiences:

To exclude somebody
To go to the wall
To place in the corner
To go round in circles
To give ground
To keep one´s distance
To attack him from behind
To break through
To wander about
Icy atmosphere
Tense atmosphere

2. The fruitfulness of a concept of space for interaction theory

This basic metaphor of space obviously contributes in significant way to the reflection of communicative experiences and to the inter-subjective exchange of those experiences – it is part of our metapragmatic discourse (Lucy 1993).

But is this basic metaphor also productive in the analysis of communication in terms of interaction theory1? Would this metaphor possibly shed light on aspects of communication that have otherwise been

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1 When I mention the phrase "interaction theory," I rely on theoretical endeavours, which try to describe, understand, or explain what Goffman called "the human encounter," i.e. a situation in which people behave in the presence of others. In my own studies I try to develop a theory which aims at social interaction as a genuine subject, comparable to what Goffman tried with his – unfinished – project of "interaction order," (Goffman 1983).

overlooked? Can this metaphor be inspiring in the work of developing new analytical concepts for understanding social interaction? Those are questions I want to deal with in this paper.

I will proceed by a problem-theoretical approach: I will state some basic problems of interaction theory, sketch some solutions-so-far to those problems, and eventually test the specific contribution of a conception of conversational space in dealing with those problems.

I draw on the following problems of interaction theory:

The problem of intersubjectivity, i.e. the question of how the connection of people in communication can be conceptualized. The social sciences offer a lot of solutions to this question, - ranging from the most simple one developed in information theory,2 that communicating people are connected by a "wire" through which information is transported to different concepts of "relation" and sociologically oriented concepts of "order," "game," or "frame," up to philosophically inspired concepts of "between" – in the radical version in Buber's Dialogical Theory. However it is just this radical version of "between" which leads to its own contradiction as the philosopher Theunissen has shown.

The problem of verbality, i.e. the question of how to conceive the content of communication in a scientifically appropriate manner. Respective scientific disciplines offer different solutions: the concept of "information," the concept of "content," or the concept of "proposition." In a strict methodological analysis, however, the idea of content comes to nothing, as Ungeheuer has shown.3

The problem of the participant in communication, i.e. the question of how the people who are communicating should be conceptualized.

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2 see the critical remarks in Reddy

3 See Matterart for an historical-critical analysis which elaborates on the social circumstances under which the concept of content became so prominent in communication theory.

Here we find suggestions such as the sender-receiver-model (in communication science) or the speaker-hearer-model (in linguistics). But that such models are insufficient for an adequate description of communication is known since Goffman's critique of the speaker-hearer-model and his differentiation of the speaker-concept in principal, loudspeaker and animator (Goffman 1981).

The problem of meaning, i.e. the question of how to conceive the meaning of utterances and actions in verbal interaction. In psychology, scholars try to deal with this problem by concepts of "effect", drawing on the subjective consequences of utterances and actions in verbal interaction. Linguistics uses concepts of "semantics," related to the systemic character of language. But those concepts are insufficient for the analysis of meaning in verbal interaction, for they cannot account for the accomplishment of meaning in the interactional process (cf. Nothdurft 1996).

3. The concept of conversational space – some demarcations
The concept of "space" will be applied to these problems. My point is that the concept of space allows for a new and fruitful treatment of those problems.

Before I turn to an elaboration of this thesis, however, I have to sketch my concept of space at least briefly. This is a delicate matter in its own because our current understanding of space is deeply influenced by the intellectual discourse of the last centuries – it is "ideological" in the sense of Henri Lefebvre. This French philosopher has shown that our current concept of space is dominated by visual aspects and that it is strongly associated with the idea of geometrical perspective, which makes space calculable on the one hand, but which confines the concept on the other hand. So my elaboration of the con-

cept of space will be a negative one, i.e. explaining what the concept of space I have in mind is *not.4*

It is not an Euclidian 3-dimensional physical space: Certainly "space" in this sense plays an important role for communication as the ecological environment or as "territory" or as part of what is called "proxemics" in semiotics. But such a concept of space would be too restrictive because it is related to the participant in interaction and not to interaction itself.

It is not the subjective space we experience around us with something like "me" in the center – this is the idea of "origo" in the sense of Karl Bühler, which is the anchor of the language system called "deixis". Again this concept of space is related to the person, not to interaction itself.

And it is not space in the sense in which it is tacitly presupposed in the discourse of conversational analysis in terms as "local production," "floor," etc.

What I have in mind instead is the idea that we as participants in conversation create in interaction by our contributions a multi-dimensional space in which we – ourselves and our co-participants – move and operate, and that we continuously change and restructure this space.

4. The concept of conversational space – some derivations

If I strain the concept of conversational space systematically I come to the following ideas:

The idea of sound space:

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4 It is remarkable that the concept of space is highly underdeveloped in interaction theory because in a strict sense it is impossible to think of an encounter of persons or to think of Self and the Other without presupposing something like a space in which the encounter can take place (!). In interaction theory space has always been considered to be something like a "neutral" sphere which has no effect on the interaction itself. See Soja 1989 for some reasons for this neglect and more relevant approaches to the topic of space.

In the idea of sound space, speaking is not regarded as something that is related to or designed for another participant in interaction, but as something that creates an acoustic space, produces resonances, vibrations, echoes and waves. The idea of sound space allows for a description of utterances which stresses their material aspects and sensual experiences and which does not rely on the distinction of speaker and hearer.

The idea of semantic space:

The idea of semantic space is that every utterance or action in social interaction has a potential for different meanings. In the concept of semantic space, the aim is not to determine *the* meaning of an utterance or an action, but to describe the different meanings of an utterance due to different presuppositions and contextualizations which are relevant in a specific social situation. The concept of semantic space allows for an adequate treatment of the ambiguity of utterances and actions in social interaction.

The idea of action space:

The aim is not to explain why a specific action was chosen by an actor, but to describe the decision *climate* which can be conceived as being composed by many motives of the actor (which might be inconsistent with each other). This idea might be illustrated by the following example. Ethnographer David Matz analyzes an episode of the Israelian-Palestine-conflict: an effort to establish negotiations. Matz is especially concerned with the political decisions of the former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak which eventually led to a stop of the negotiations. Matz draws on the concept of "climate" to explain Barak's decision:

> Pulling this together into an interpretation of Barak's thinking on that Saturday, I would conclude that he just wore out. His optimism and drive to reach an agreement were not enough to overcome the pessimism and scepticism all around him, and in him. Put differently, nearly everything on the above list weighed on him. Perhaps we should not choose from the list, but rather see it as an array of lures beckoning Barak not to negotiate further at Taba. Taken together (even when they are inconsistent with each other) *they describe a climate* resisting further negotiation, impacting his viewpoint and thus his decision (Matz, p. 370, emphasis mine).

The idea of stage space:

The concept of stage space allows for a relation-sensitive description of social interaction, i.e. a description which comprises the social relations of a participant to all other participants present.5

5. Rethinking the basic problems of interaction theory

Applying the considerations elaborated so far to the basic problems of interaction theory, I come to the following conclusions:

The concept of conversational space does not offer answers to the specified problems, but offers a concept in which these problems do not show up!

The question *how to conceive the connection of people in communication* does not show up because people in communication are not conceived as being connected any more, but as present and included in a space whose dimensions and features are experienced by the people and are taken into account for their communicative behaviour.

The question *how to conceive the content of communication* does not show up any more because the contributions of the participants are regarded as moments in the process of space-design which emerges and changes due to these contributions.

The question *how to conceptualize the participants in communication* does not show up because the analytical point of reference is not the single individual any more, but the space in its respective features.6

The question *how to grasp the meaning of utterances and actions in social interaction* is not relevant any more because the aim of analytical endeavours is the description of the semantic potential of an utterance or action due to the respective interactional context.

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5 Comparable to the concept of "Figuration" in the sense of Norbert Elias.
6 This idea is analogous with system-theoretical thinking of course.

6. The conversational space – next necessary steps

In this paper I could only sketch the idea of conversational space in a very preliminary way. I consider this idea to be a promising one in the project of theorizing social interaction. At least it stimulates a reconceptualization of space and it produces analytical concepts which seem to be worth developing further.

This reconceptualization of the concept of space can attach to the recent debate of space in cultural studies which was triggered by Frederik Jameson's paper on postmodernism (1992), and can rely on the contributions of Lefebvre and its actualization by Edward Soja (1996, 1989). It can be argued that the concept of space is of comparable relevance for social theory as the concept of time, which has been dominant in the cultural discourse of the last century.

Among the analytical concepts which have to be worked out is the concept of "space-design" and the concept of "semantic space" and semantic potential. Many theoretical adventures await the scholar who enters conversational space.

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