

The specificity of human communication eludes semiotic theories

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Paul Kockelman's ambitious paper connects social and cultural anthropology with evolutionary theory on the basis of two assumptions: first, humans are evolved organisms; second, culture itself evolves. These two assumptions have been the starting point of much work in anthropology, connecting the natural sciences with the study of human culture. One reason why mainstream anthropologists (especially when influenced by the interpretive tradition) tend not to be interested in such approaches, is the widespread impression that naturalistic accounts of culture do not deal with the meaning of public symbols, or put excessive restrictions on talk of meaning and symbols.

There have been, however, many interesting proposals to naturalize the study of signs and their meaning. Kockelman's could be described as drawing on two theoretical traditions: the semiotic study of natural signs (Peirce, 1868), and the selectionist account of signals proposed by Ruth Millikan among others (Millikan 1984). We feel the pull of both approaches, but we fundamentally disagree with the way they account for human communication.

Kockelman borrows from semioticians the intuition that some signals can represent features of the world merely by virtue of standing in some relation with it and with an observer. Thus, the visual shape of a bear signals the presence of that bear to observers (Kockelman, p. 9). No intentionality is required on behalf of the bear. Indeed, a stone may "signal" its presence in the same way.

Such natural signs, Kockelman argues, may come to serve communicative functions, through a process of selection. Like Millikan, he argues that linguistic devices (words, syntactic forms, inflections, etc.) become stable in a community because of the regular patterns of correspondence between the use of the linguistic device and the responses of hearers. In particular, when linguistic devices are words, these regular patterns constitute the words' conventional meanings. Both human and non-human signals are subject to various processes of selection: most non-human animal signals were selected as part of the organisms' biological evolution, while most human signals were selected during cultural history. But both are selective processes through which items with meaning emerge. Consider, for instance, the calls of Vervet monkeys: these calls, one type for each one of their major predators, may have been selected because they serve to warn other monkeys.

In this way, one can get meaning from causal relations combined with selection. In Kockelman's view, these two basic mechanisms (occasional refinements notwithstanding) suffice to give us a complete account of human communication: "Human-specific cognitive processes and linguistic practices are just particularly complex modes of significance and selection." (Kockelman, p. 13)

We disagree. Human signals have at least one property that other animal communication systems lack. Human signals cannot be explained by significance and selection alone. Focusing on these processes is enlightening when trying to understand non-human communication (from Vervet call to Bee dance) but will lead us no further.

According to Gricean theories of communication (Grice 1989, Sperber and Wilson 1995, Tomasello 2010, Csibra and Gergely 2009), human communication relies on the interpretation of communicative intentions in a way that no other communication system does. When one is decoding Vervet alarm calls, one does not need to pay any attention to the communicative intentions of monkeys.

We can learn all we need to know about the meaning of Vervet calls by observing their causes and their history. Knowing that a caller intends to be heard does not tell us anything we didn't know about the meaning of his calls. His intentions do not figure.

Compare with human pointing. If A points at some region in space, it would, most of the time, be very hard for B to figure out what object or process A wishes to draw B's attention to without making assumptions about A's intentions, beliefs, and beliefs about B's beliefs. A's intentions are not just necessary to the production of her pointing gesture. They are crucial for its interpretation too: B can make sense of the signal only by being aware of A's communicative intention. In other words, understanding communicated information is not for humans just a process of decoding string of signifiers; it is an inferential process that starts with attributing communicative intentions to the communicator and ends with a conclusion about what the communicator meant or wanted to communicate. Human communication is based on the expression and recognition of communicative intentions. This (and not necessarily some greater "complexity") might be the main root of the flexibility and richness of human communication.

Paul Kockelman dismisses Gricean theories for being overly preoccupied with psychology, and not concerned enough with the public aspects of communication. However, the empirical study of overt interactions is an important aspect of the Gricean tradition (Levinson and Brown 1987, Sperber and Noveck 2004); this approach is quite compatible with the strong interest many anthropologists take in the history of public systems of signs.

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