The Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication: A cultural approach to interaction

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A B S T R A C T

This essay proposes a Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication (PMC) for expanding the practical role of metatheory (a theory of theories), conceived here as a useful tool for directly analyzing interpersonal interactions. Traditionally, metatheory has been used in an epistemological way (e.g., for the organization of knowledge) rather than in a practical way. However, starting from the traditions of thought proposed by Craig in his article Communication theory as a field, this essay argues and illustrates how metatheory can also be useful for making direct analysis of communication and enriching, at the same time, our understanding of communicative conflicts. This challenge is answered by the PMC, a (meta)model articulated on three levels: culture (shared values), dialectical tensions (contradictions that are primary forces in relationships) and metadiscourse (talk about communication).

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1. Introduction

“My last problematic conversation was about the amount of geographical distance we have between us. . . . Since we are so far away, she has trust issues because she does not know what I am doing here. She does not take time to be understanding.” This excerpt from an undergraduate interpersonal questionnaire1 illustrates how a male partner describes the main problem of his romantic relationship. In general, problematic conversations appear when subjects perceive that something is not working in the relationship because of a misunderstanding–failure in the understanding or disagreement. Problematic conversations frequently are related with one of the dialectical tensions that characterize relationships: those related to autonomy, self-disclosure or predictability (Baxter, 1990). These dialectical tensions provide fertile grounds for partners to construct conflictive interactions.

In response to understanding problematic conversations, this paper develops the Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication (PMC), a theoretical proposal for analyzing relational misunderstandings related with autonomy, self-disclosure or predictability and for proposing communicative solutions. It is considered a metamodel because it is based on different discourses about communication (communication about communication). And these different points of view give subjects the opportunity to re-think their interactions in light of different communicative perspectives. The latter derive from the fact that the PMC is a model based on metatheory (also called theoretical metadiscourse), specifically on the different traditions of thought in communication (semiotic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, critical, phenomenological, and cybernetic) proposed by Robert T. Craig in his Constitutive Metamodel (CM) included in his article Communication theory as a field (1999). According to Craig, the traditions, apart from organizing knowledge, represent different ways of talking about communication and its problems (practical or ordinary metadiscourse). And this is the starting point of the PMC, a pragmatic model that proposes that metatheory is not just a useful way for organizing knowledge, but it is also a practical art useful for researching our communication processes and solving problems. I will take into account the alternative points of view included in Craig’s (1999) metamodel (semiotic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, critical, phenomenological, and cybernetic) in my design of alternative ways of thinking and solving problematic interactions.

Because theoretical and ordinary metadiscourse influence each other, I propound that thinking about our (conflictive) interactions from different points of view will help us overcome our communicative problems. This idea aligns with Dewey’s pragmatism. As Craig (2007, p. 143) has argued “the project of communication theory under a constitutive metamodel, as a pragmatist enterprise,
entails a political program broadly aligned with Dewey’s pragmatist democratic ideal to promote social conditions in which progressively more inclusive, participative, critically reflexive communication practices can flourish.” The ethical commitment of this proposal advances the idea that democratic and pluralistic values can flourish from reflecting and understanding our communicative practices from different points of view.

As in the situation suggested by the quotation at the beginning of this essay, these problematic interactions are often related to issues of autonomy (if individuals perceive they need more or less independence), openness (if individuals feel they would have to disclose more or not disclose so much) and predictability (if the relationship seeks innovation or routine) (Baxter, 1990). The application of the metamodel to communicative problems found in our everyday talk is based on the principle that “it is good to be able to reflect on a situation from different points of view, considering the implications of different problem descriptions” (Craig, 2009, p. 9). Craig’s constitutive metamodel gives us resources for reflecting on communication problems, a first step for the resolution of conflicts. From this point of view, the constitutive metamodel and its traditions of thought provide resources for reflecting on communication problems, which is a modest first step in the resolution of conflicts, because the way we think and talk about communication simultaneously constructs our own communicative actions and processes.

How we talk about communication (practical or ordinary metadiscourse/metacommunication) depends on the cultural contradictions of our time (Hofstede, 1980) and the dialectical tensions of personal interactions (Baxter, 1990). The use of metatheory for analyzing how we talk about communication and highlighting at the same time different ways of thinking about our conflictive interactions is an example of how theoretical (the scientific discourses about communication) and practical (the ordinary way of talking about communication) metadiscourses influence each other (Craig, 1999). Together they conform metadiscourse.

A place where the discourses about communication (ordinary, academic, theoretical, journalistic…) take place. That is why communication theory is not just a discourse for explaining society[,] it is a discourse in society and contributes to the evolution of communication practices that constitute society (Craig, 2010).

From this point of view, theoretical metadiscourse envisioned as a practical art that offers resources for people to better understand and improve their ordinary metadiscourse. The PMC, which is articulated on three levels (culture, dialectical tensions and metadiscourse), is a practical way for explaining and analyzing how we talk about communication in interpersonal relationships, how our talk makes sense within specific cultural and dialectical contexts, and how the traditions of thought are practical resources for us to re-think our conflictive interactions from different points of view.

The main goal of this essay is thus to develop a model of communication that advances the traditions of thought in order to solve conflictive interactions in our everyday life.

2. Metadiscourse as a practical art

Metatheoretical approaches are often used in an epistemological dimension, above all, for the organization of scientific knowledge (its limitations, analytical perspectives on the object(s) of study, etc.). In the case of the field of communication, theoretical metadiscourse, that is, the scientific discourses about communication, has been used as a way of organizing this field and consolidating, at the same time, its scientific identity (Galindo Cáceres, 2008; García-Jiménez, 2007). However, theoretical metadiscourse can be a useful tool for the study of communication in all its levels (interpersonal, group, organizational, mass media, and public opinion) because it is a practical art. From this point of view, metatheory of communication is not just a theory of theories but a corpus of knowledge that can make first-level analysis on social symbolic practices:

The constitutive model of communication as metamodel proposes that communication be more than an explanandum, that is, something that ought to be explained by our models or theories, but that it also be considered an explanans, that is, something explaining how our world is what it is and how it functions (Cooren, 2012, p. 2).

The constitutive metamodel, proposed by Craig in the article Communication theory as a field (1999),” is a landmark article (Cooren, 2012, p. 2) and arguably one of the most referenced papers in communication research in the last decades. Up to now, most of the developments based on the CM have mainly focused on its epistemological contributions (Martin Algarra, 2009; Myers, 2001; Russil, 2008) and less on its pragmatic application (Cooren, 2012).

In this sense, Cooren (2012, p. 13) reminds us that communication theory as metadiscourse should be understood as a practical endeavor, capable of providing conceptual resources for reflecting on real, everyday social, political, and ethical problems. In the midst of the turmoil that this planet and its population (human and nonhuman) are currently experiencing, whether in Russia, Syria, Egypt, or elsewhere, we, as communication scholars, should show that our traditions have something to say about what is happening in the world.

Craig’s paper accomplished important epistemological and practical goals in the field of communication. First, from an epistemological point of view, it organized knowledge about communication by means of a constitutive metamodel that included the most important traditions of thought that historically have analyzed communication (semitic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, critical, phenomenological, and cybernetic). Second, this metamodel in a practical sense proposed different ways of talking and thinking about communication and, therefore, different ways of understanding our social practices. CM showed ways of talking about communication not just in a scientific way, but also in an ordinary way.

3. The Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication and its levels

PMC is a new theoretical and methodological proposal for analyzing interpersonal communication. It is based on several preliminary studies about metacommunication, culture, and interaction. Firstly, it is based on studies that have developed the metatheory of communication and its traditions of thought (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999; Martin Algarra, 2009; Myers, 2001; Russil, 2008). Secondly, it is based on literature that has outlined cultural trends (or cultural values) and the limitations of these kinds of theoretical approaches because of the dynamism and complexity of culture (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Cray & Mallory, 1998; Fougere & Moulettes, 2007; Goodwin, 1999; Gudykunst

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2 It is one of the most referenced articles in the field of communication since its publication in 1999. Specifically, among the journals with a higher impact factor (Communication Theory, Journal of Communication, Communication Monographs, Communication Research, and Human Communication Research), “Communication theory as a field” is the 23rd most referenced article among 4048 articles published in those journals from 1999 to 2012.
& Matsumoto, 1996; Hofstede, 1980; Smith, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Thirdly, it is based on previous studies of interpersonal communication, specifically those that have highlighted the dialectical contradictions that appear in everyday interaction (Baxter, 1990, 2004; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Baxter & Erbert, 1999).

Starting from this background, the Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication is articulated on three interrelated levels: those of culture, dialectical tensions, and metacommunication, respectively. This proposal will attempt to overcome the limitations of those studies that have focused on culture in general (analysis from a cultural perspective) and have “forgotten” more specific aspects like the everyday talk, or the opposite, those studies that have focused just on rhetorical aspects (analysis from a rhetorical perspective) and have “forgotten” that every interaction takes place within specific cultural frames. The three levels mentioned above explain how culture, personal relationships, and metadiscourse connect and interact with one another. The principle is that the practices and conceptions that people have about communication (its meaning, problems, perspectives, etc.) often “make sense” within a particular cultural setting and interaction pattern and become less useful outside these settings and patterns. That is why the way we talk about communication in our ordinary life constructs—and is constructed by—cultural values (individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity) (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996, pp. 21–22) and by the dialectical contradictions that characterize personal relationships (autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, predictability-novelty) (Baxter, 1990, p. 70–71).

The PMC would be represented in a circular scheme illustrating how culture, dialectical tensions, and metadiscourse produce and reproduce each other in a complex interaction that is at the heart of this proposal. There is no beginning or end in a circle (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), which is why this metaphor encapsulates how communication, culture, and dialectical tensions are causes and consequences of each other. Culture, which shapes the way we talk, is also maintained through communication and the everyday talk (Tracy, 2002).

The analysis of cultural trends (level 1) points out where the conceptions of communication come from and how people make sense of their communicative practices: “Culture operates as a frame within which emotional experience is organized, labeled, classified, and interpreted” (Iliouz, 1997, p. 3). The dialectical tensions of interactions (level 2) proposed by Baxter (1990) identify the conflicting “grounds” perceived in the relationship. These two levels frame the ways people talk about communication: in a phenomenological, critical, sociopsychological, sociocultural, rhetorical, cybernetic, or semiotic way (ordinary metadiscourse, level 3).

3.1. Level 1: some trends in cultural values

The first level analyzes how culture is reflected in communicative practices and conceptions. How can we point out general tensions that help us identify some cultural trends in interpersonal relationships? Hofstede (1980) proposed several cross-cultural values (dimensions of cultural variability), which represent some dialectical cultural tensions. These tensions are: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity and power distance. These cultural values are connected with communication because they shape “our various identities [and], in turn, sculpt the way we communicate” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. viii).

Cultural values form the basic lenses through which we view and value our own communication and the communication of others. Hofstede's model provides useful dimensions for describing cultures even though his classification is crude, because he used nations as social units, a practice that has been criticized because it presents culture as static set of beliefs (see Fougere & Moulettes, 1997; Smith, 2002; or Cray & Mallory, 1998). That is why PMC proposes interpersonal interactions (partners and friends) as social units. In doing so, the analysis avoids the division of the world that seems to be present in Hofstede in between countries that are developed and modern and those other countries that are traditional and on the “backward side” (Fougere & Moulettes, 2007). In this sense, it has been argued that focusing directly on interactions is more relevant than focusing on nations (Fougere & Moulettes, 2007).

Starting from Hofstede’s proposal and taking into account its limitations, one finds the cultural tensions that characterize the interpersonal interactions to be the following.

3.1.1. Individualism–collectivism

This dimension has been also defined as Individualism-Holism (Sang-Yeon, Jihyun, & Tae-Seop, 2013). In any case, this is the most used dimension of cultural variability (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996). Individualism implies that individual goals are emphasized more than group goals. In the context of individualization, biographies, removed from traditional precepts and certainties from external control and general moral laws, become open and dependent on individual decision-making. Individualistic people emphasize “I.” Thus while they change friends and partners readily, rational principles and norms nonetheless form the basis of their interaction (Triandis, 1995). According to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, (1995, p. 5),

> It is not possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should or could be: rather, these vary in substance, exceptions, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship.

On the other hand, for collectivistic people, group goals take precedence over individual goals, while traditions and universal moral laws have a greater influence. Consequently, different degrees of individualism or collectivism will be present in any relationship.

There are several factors that explain this cultural tension between individualism and collectivism. Examples include economic considerations (Richer citizens are more independent than individuals in poorer conditions who are more dependent on one another and need to share limited resources.), religion (Protestantism enhances individualism and Catholicism collectivism.), and climate (Countries with colder climates tend to be more individualistic—a fact that reflects their possible dependence for survival on personal initiatives.) (Goodwin, 1999).

3.1.2. Uncertainty avoidance

Members of cultures with high uncertainty avoidance trend to reject uncertainty, ambiguity, and people with ideas different from theirs, and they trend to accept formal rules and absolute truth. In addition, they have a strong desire for consensus. We could summarize high uncertainty avoidance as follows: “What is different... is dangerous” (Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996, p. 42). On the other hand, members of low uncertainty-avoidance cultures have weaker superegos, accept dissent, and take risks more frequently than members of high uncertainty-avoidance cultures. Thus different degrees of uncertainty avoidance will appear in any relationship.

3.1.3. Power distance

Individuals from higher power-distance cultures accept power (even when it is distributed unequally) as a natural part of society. Contrarily, members of low power-distance cultures believe power should be used only when it is legitimate and prefer expert or legitimate power. From this point of view, high power-distance cultures have a vertical orientation that promotes informative and
unidirectional processes. Communication and horizontal processes are more common in low power-distance relationships. Different degrees of power distance will appear in any relationship.

3.1.4. Masculinity–femininity

High masculinity involves a relatively greater value placed on things, power, heroism, achievement, material success, and assertiveness. By contrast, systems in which people, quality of life, relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and nurturance prevail are low in masculinity or high in femininity (Goodwin, 1999; Hofstede, 1980). In masculine relationships, it is suggested that materialist and unidirectional conceptions of communication are more characteristic, while symbolic conceptions of communication (dialog, empathy, an I-Thou relationship, etc.) are the natural ground of femininity. Differing degrees of masculinity and femininity will appear in any relationship.

3.2. Level 2. Dialectical tensions in relationships

This level refers to the dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships, or the “contradictions that constitute the primary dialectical forces which parties experience in their interpersonal relationships” (Baxter, 1990, pp. 70–71). A contradiction is present whenever two tendencies or forces are interdependent (the dialectical principle of unity) yet mutually negate one another (the dialectical principle of negation) (Baxter, 1990). Baxter identifies three dialectical tensions, that is, three contradictory forces that are simultaneously present in any relationship: “Relationships are dialogs of integration with and against separation, certainty with and against uncertainty, and openness with and against non-[expression]” (Baxter, 2004, p. 8). It is argued in the present essay that these forces are the grounds/spheres where culture and metadiscourse interact. Why do dialectical tensions comprise the place where culture and practical metadiscourse converge? First, because relationships are not isolated, dyadic phenomena driven by the psychological states of the two parties; “rather they are social processes that speak culture whenever the parties open their mouths in conversation” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 51). Relationships are sites of cultures; relationships talk culture and utterances are “social in their articulation of circulating cultural discourses” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 52). Second, relationships “are constituted in communication practices” (Baxter, 2004, p. 3). That is the reason that I have presented in Fig. 1 how culture, dialectical tensions, and metadiscourse produce and reproduce each other.

The dialectical contradictions (also defined in this paper as natural grounds where culture interacts with metadiscourse) characterizing every relationship are the following.

3.2.1. Autonomy–connection

Autonomy refers to separation from others; connection, to the forsaking of individual autonomy. This is probably the most central contradiction, because no relationship can exist unless the parties forsake at least some of their individual autonomy. However, “too much connection paradoxically destroys the relationship because the individual entities become lost” (Baxter, 1990, p. 70).

As has been said above, because relationships “speak culture,” the autonomy–connection contradiction would connect with the discourse of community versus individualism in society (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 51):

The value attached to integration is a system of meaning that reflects a circulating discourse of community in the broader US society … The value attached to separation is a system of meaning that reflects the competing discourse of utilitarian/expressive individualism that also circulates broadly in US society.

Stated differently, the tension in relationships between autonomy and connection corresponds with the tension in society between social solidarity (or unity) and social division (separation) (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Hence autonomy versus connection in relationships is a kind of individualistic or collectivistic trend in culture.

3.2.2. Openness–closedness

This dichotomy refers to the tensions that appear in relationships when partners perceive that they should self-disclose more, or the contrary that they should self-disclose less. “Relationships need both information openness and information closedness. On the one hand, open disclosure between relationship parties is a necessary condition for intimacy; but on the other hand, openness creates vulnerabilities for self, other and the relationship that necessitate information closed[n]ess” (Baxter, 1990, p. 71). Here, parties grapple with the need to simultaneously be open and closed. This dialectical tension is also reflected in culture. For example, it would connect with the cultural values associated with masculinity-femininity and power distance. As was said before, feminine culture empowers communication and dialog, which connects with openness. High power-distance cultures promote informative and unidirectional processes, which would represent a certain kind of closedness (weak feedback or dialog) in the interaction. This aspect of how relationships reflect cultural and social trends is also highlighted by Baxter and Braithwaite (2010, p. 52):

“The value attached to expressive openness is understandable to those who are culturally steeped in the discourse of individualism.”

3.2.3. Predictability–novelty

Relationships need predictability but also novelty, which is why “the parties struggle with [the] simultaneous yet oppositional needs for uncertainty and novelty versus certainty and predictability” (Baxter & Erbert, 1999, p. 548). This dialectical tension refers to the fundamental opposition between stability and flux (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). It would connect, from a cultural point of view, with uncertainty avoidance or the best way to handle and perceive uncertainty.

3.3. Level 3. How people talk: a metacommunicative approach

Concerning the ways of talking about communication (level 3), according to Craig’s constitutive metamodel there are several ways of understanding the world, talking about communication, and defining its problems. Some of them are framed in a transactional conception of communication (sociopsychological), others in a conception of common construction (phenomenology, sociocultural and critical), others in both (rhetorical, semiotic, and cybernetic).
The traditions of thought illustrating how the distinct point of view of each tradition appears in ordinary metadiscourse will now be considered. The ways we talk about communication, that is, the traditions of thought in our ordinary talk, are developed below.

3.3.1. Rhetorical

Within this tradition, communication is the art of persuasive talking, the art of using words in strategic, persuasive, eloquent, and skillful ways. A rhetorical style implies the development of strong, credible and convincing arguments. For talking about communication, actors will use words like “good/bad communicator,” “power of words,” “strategic communication,” “charismatic and credible speaker, ”etc. This conception has been criticized because of its reliance on the speakers’ use of artifice, obfuscation, or manipulative implications. In interpersonal relationships, subjects talk in a rhetorical way when they are speaking about what has happened (in one of the three spheres of level 2) in terms of the quality of their communication skills and charisma. Another way of talking in a rhetorical way will be when speakers identify the problem as not knowing what to say or how to say it. From this point of view, a “good communicator” will be one who talks in a strategic or charismatic way.

3.3.2. Sociopsychological

According to Craig (1999, p. 143), this tradition conceives communication as a process of expression, interactions, and influence, a process in which the behavior of humans or other complex organisms expresses psychological mechanisms, states and traits, and, through interactions with the similar expressions of other individuals, produces a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects.

The communicative process has causes and effects as well as psychological explanation. There are psychological forces that explain what is going on. Communication is the process by which individuals interact and influence each other. Communication always implies a mediation (of technological devices, psychological predispositions, etc.), so there is not a direct encounter (as in other traditions like phenomenology). Communication understood as the interchange of messages is a materialist conception that views communication as something different than common and symbolic construction (phenomenology or sociocultural traditions) or interaction-network (cybernetics). When the main trend is the socio-psychological tradition, partners will understand their communication as the interchange of messages which have a causal relationship. Speakers will explain their communicative behavior in terms of psychological causes through emotions, traits, attitudes, traumas, stress, depression, etc. In doing so, the problem is identified with specific causes that come from the human mind (psychology). This conclusion implies that conflict is not something constructed by partners in a particular conversation, but is the consequence of previous situations that have altered the psychological condition of speakers. From this conception, actors are not seen as sharing the same sphere as in the phenomenological encounter, but have different roles perfectly delimited from each other (i.e., “I talk, you listen.”). There are senders, receivers, messages and effects as Lasswell proposed in his well known communication model (Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect). In this context, a good communicator is anyone who exchanges messages in a successful way by creating effects that influence (and change) human’s psychological mind and emotions.

3.3.3. Semiotic

This tradition believes “communication is typically theorized as intersubjective mediation by signs” (Craig, 1999, p. 136). From this point of view communication is easiest when we share a common language, words can mean different things to different people so communication is a constant danger, meanings are often conveyed indirectly or by subtle aspects of behavior that may go unnoticed, and that certain ideas are easier to express in certain contexts (i.e., a picture is worth a thousand words; email should not be used for delicate business negotiations (Craig, 1999, p. 137).

The communicative problem derived from the signs or symbols (mis)used and not from culture. Further, the problem is the consequence of “wrong messages,” “bad communication,” or “misunderstanding” (i.e., “I said something that you didn’t understand.”).

3.3.4. Phenomenological

The phenomenological tradition believes communication is dialog, understanding, openness to others, genuineness, supportiveness, empathy, authenticity, and the encounter with others who are people, not “things.” It is a direct interaction – without any mediation – authentic soul-to-soul contact that is the basis for the construction of both the real self and supportive relationships. Non-transparency, lies, or instrumental relationships are the way to reification, which are in opposition to the development of a real or full self (Buher, 1998). The latter can be accomplished, per phenomenology, only through real dialog. According to Craig (1999, p. 138), “communication explains the interplay of identity and difference in authentic human relationships and cultivates communication practices that enable and sustain authentic relationships.” Real dialog is thus founded on honesty, reciprocity, non-domination, transparency, and the capacity to empathize with the experience of others. “It is commonly asserted that interpersonal interaction is the basic form of human communication, and that mass or technologically mediated communication is at best a poor substitute for direct human contact” (Craig, 1999, p. 140). The limitation of this approach to ordinary talk is that phenomenology focuses on the interpersonal relationship, but not in the context or the personal networks (family, job, friends, etc.) that frame every human interaction.

Furthermore, phenomenology has an ideal conception of communication that can be difficult to achieve in everyday life because of the limitations imposed by institutional life. This is probably one of the main metadiscourse conceptions that conform to the ideal relationship in our ordinary talk (e.g., “Talk honestly, from your soul”; “We are one,” etc.). Nevertheless, it is necessary to identify not some ideal relationship shared by partners, but their understanding of ordinary communication between them and how they conceive of communication during conflict. Phenomenology is focused on the understanding, the encounter, and the empathy of partners in the most intimate sphere. When people talk as understood by phenomenologists, other elements of the communicative process like effects, context, social networks, etc. take a secondary position. From this point of view, a good communicator is one who is able to dialog and understand his/her partner in open, honest, and transparent ways.

3.3.5. Sociocultural

Communication in the sociocultural tradition “is theorized as a symbolic process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural patterns” (Craig, 1999, p. 144). This focus explains how social order, culture, and the most generalized levels of society are produced and reproduced through verbal interactions. This
understanding also includes how individuals act in society according to the meanings apprehended throughout life. Clearly, this tradition integrates macro and micro levels of interaction. Specifically, constructionism (e.g., Social life is a construction that we apprehend and perceive as objective reality,) or symbolic interactionism (i.e., how people act according to the meanings they assign to different situations) are two of the theoretical trends that conceive of life as a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In interpersonal interactions subjects talk in a sociocultural way when they understand that communication and relationship are a common construction. There is also talk about society in society, about social and cultural groups, their organization, activity, discourses (e.g., social movements like “Occupy Wall Street”). Norms, rituals, worldviews, and meanings will be a symbolic negotiation of the actors who will “act” in society according to their role and/or their group ascription (e.g., a good father, a responsible son, a protective mother, an activist, an ecologist, etc.). When conflict appears in the interaction or in one of the identified spheres of level 2, there will be a common construction problem that has been created by both partners and responds to a particular cultural context. The origin of the problem is not “the cause” but is constructed together through interaction. From this point of view, a good communicator will be one who is able to construct consensus and common meanings and agreements.

3.3.6. Critical

From this point of view, communication generates inequalities, so real communication is a critique of distorted communication. In short, communication is critical metacommunication: “Communication conceived in this way explains how social injustice is perpetuated by ideological distortions and how justice can be restored through communicative practices that enable critical reflection or consciousness-raising in order to unmask those distortions and thereby enable political action to liberate the participants from them” (Craig, 1999, 147). There is inherent conflict, distortion, injustice, domination, etc. in society. The exposure of social injustice and the opportunity to learn and change is one of the normative goals of this tradition. “Capitalism, racism, and patriarchy” (Craig, 1999, p. 147) are some of the discourses denounced by critical thinking. In interpersonal relationships, critical trends will be dominant when the metacommunication of subjects presents a clear double-critical dimension about their own communicative processes when they perceive a negative cultural context that affects one or both of them. From critical metadiscourse, talk will focus on social discourses and dominant ways of thinking (capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia etc.) that promote domination, exclusion, segregation or marginalization. Here, a good communicator will be the person who criticizes power for masking inequalities.

3.3.7. Cybernetic

Communication is understood as the interaction of systems (family, job, university, friends, neighborhood, etc.), as a circular phenomenon. Here one finds not action-reaction, but interaction. Human relationships are framed in systems – complex processes of interaction – where the behavior of one person affects and is affected by the attitudes of others. Individuals cannot exclude themselves from social life. The cybernetic conception of communication implies that partners understand their relationships as connected with and influenced by their social context (e.g., the current economic crisis, the culture of the country, their work situation, etc.) and by their social networks (e.g. family, friends, job, colleagues, etc.). That is, the relationship is framed in multiple networks and the conversation includes talk about channels, feedback, interconnection, etc. From this point of view, in the everyday talk a good communicator is the one who is able to interconnect well with many people.

4. Behind the levels of PMC: communication as transmission and ritual

After this examination of the three working levels, it is important to consider: how these levels intersect with each other? The answer is they do so in the two broadest conceptions of communication: communication as transmission and communication as ritual (Carey, 1989). In the transmission view, communication is a process where a transmitter sends a message to a receiver: “Communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control. It is a view of communication that derives from one of the most ancient of human dreams: the desire to increase the speed and effect of messages as they travel in space (…) Communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people” (Carey, 1989, p. 15). Communication is thus transaction and interchange of messages through mediation (e.g., technological devices, psychological conditions, etc.) where participants have delimited roles (sender, receiver, speaker, audience, information sources, etc.). This idea is based on a real world that exists outside of interaction, and messages are a representation of reality. On the contrary, in the ritual view, communication is a construction of reality where meanings are produced through interaction: “Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 23). Because reality must be repaired for it consistently breaks down (Carey, 1989, p. 25). And therefore, reality is not something objective, solid and fixed that is outside of the subjects; rather, it is endlessly produced and reproduced in interaction through a negotiation of meaning, which is sometimes pre-defined and imposed. In this conception, participants share the same space (no different roles) because they collaborate, co-construct (intersubjectivity), change or simply reproduce meanings through communication. “We first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced” (Carey, 1989, p. 30).

Carey also talks about objectivism and expressivism (in Tell, 2013, p. 112), where objectivism understands that reality is independent of the observer and expressivism holds that reality is not independent of human actors; rather, it is an expression of human action. Objectivism and expressivism mark the essential difference between administrative (sociopsychological tradition) and critical research (Tell, 2013, p. 112).

The dominance of each conception of communication, historically, has depended in part on the cultural context (Carey, 1989). The development of the railroad or the telegraph boosted the idea of communication as transportation during the 19th Century (Modernity). With the consolidation of mass media during the 20th Century and the advent of digital technologies more recently (Post-modernity), communication has been more and more conceived as participation and dialog—a conception that connects with the ritual view.

In this sense, Modernity and its characteristic grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) connect with objective conceptions of reality and communication (like the one proposed by the sociopsychological perspective). Meanwhile, Postmodernity and its dissolution of grand narratives (Lyotard, 1984) and stronger presence of subjectivism and diversity (Vattimo, 1992), would easily connect with constructivist conceptions of communication (like the one developed by the sociocultural tradition).

Seymour (2011, p. 288) has developed these ties between theories and cultural trends, highlighting “while modern social scientific frames of inquiry focus on the communicative conditions of human
beings in discourse, postmodern reassessments shift attention to human being as emergent from discourse meetings.” Consequently, the postmodern turn in communication theory and ordinary talk (metadiscourse) opens up the issues of subjectivity, power relations, and dialog among participants (Seymour, 2011, p. 288), including questions regarding the phenomenological, sociocultural and critical traditions of thought. The author points out how some communicative conceptions relate more with a modern culture while other traditions relate more with postmodern values. Said differently:

Foundational interpersonal communication theories frame addresses questions of how the structures of communicative conditions are manifested, appropriated, and can be assessed of human beings relate with one another. These foundational models include the social exchange model, the behavioral environmental model, the rhetorical sensitivity model, and the interactional models of human communicative action (…). Postmodern critical literature in communication addresses issues of power relations, gender identity, meaning construction and negotiation in human discourse (Seymour, 2011, p. 288)

Starting from Seymour’s approach, the transaction- objectivism view aligns with modern values while the ritual-expressivism view is considered more postmodern. Thus, some traditions of thought relate more with a transmission view (like sociopsychological, and rhetorical), as others are more ritual (phenomenology or sociocultural). Finally, because of its symbolic and material dimensions, critical, semiotic and cybernetic perspectives include elements from both the ritual and the transmission views. This aspect has been defined by Williams (1977) as cultural materialism and Bourdieu as constructivist structuralism: “There exist within the social world itself and not only within symbolic systems, objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or representations” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 14).

The research developed by Oudenhoven, Mechelse, and Dreu (1998) can enlighten how some cultural and interactional trends connect with certain metadiscourses. In a study conducted among employees from five different European countries, the authors concluded that in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, organizational members consider social conflict to be natural and inherent of daily life, and they tend to believe that social conflict can be approached constructively. In contrast, the same research points out that employees in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to consider conflict as undesirable, feeling compelled to avoid it as much as possible. These two aspects could be suggesting that a low uncertainty avoidance cultural context aligns with the constructivist conceptions of communication (like stated by phenomenological or sociocultural traditions).

The same study argues that in cultures with relatively low power distance, employees prefer a consultative management style, and exhibit stronger preferences for open and cooperative communication. In cultures with high power distance there is more harmony among workers from different organizational levels than in those cultures with a higher power distance (Oudenhoven et al., 1998, p. 444). The cooperative character of low power distance reflects the conceptions of communication developed by the sociocultural or phenomenological traditions of thought, with their emphasis on dialog and common construction of meanings. On the contrary, unidirectional or informative processes (high power distance/vertical organization of society) better aligns the with sociopsychological and rhetorical perspectives and their conceptions of communication as transmission or persuasion.

Finally, Oudenhoven et al. (1998) point out that managers from highly feminine nations show a more constructive behavior in conflict with colleagues than managers from masculine cultures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>The levels of the Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication as transaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.1. Cultural tensions</td>
<td>Collectivistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Uncertainty Avoidance</td>
<td>Low Uncertainty Avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Power Distance</td>
<td>Low Power Distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>Femininity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.2. Dialectical tensions</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closedness</td>
<td>Openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictability</td>
<td>Novelty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.3. Metacommunication</td>
<td>Socio-psychological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
<td>Sociocultural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical, Semiotic, Cybernetic</td>
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This aspect suggests that the domination of feminine values will enhance constructivist conceptions of communication (as sociocultural or phenomenological traditions sustain). On the other hand, masculine values easily connect with more unidirectional conceptions of communication, as advanced through sociopsychological or rhetorical perspectives. In masculine relationships, it is suggested that materialist and unidirectional conceptions of communication are more characteristic, while symbolic conceptions of communication (dialog, empathy, an I-Thou relationship, etc.) are the natural ground of femininity.

In summary, communication as a transaction of messages is related to collectivism (Modernity and its traditional values associated to grand narratives), masculine, high uncertainty avoidance and high power distance cultures. Further, autonomy, closeness, and predictability (level 2) are the dialectical trends that connect with the transmission view. On the other hand, communication as a common construction of meanings is more prevalent within individualistic (Postmodern, subjective and relativistic era), low uncertainty avoidance, low power distance, and feminine oriented cultural trends. The conception of communication as construction refers, finally, to connection, openness, and novelty. All these interrelations and connections are showed in Table 1 (The levels of the Pragmatic Metamodel of Communication), below.

5. Discussion

To conclude, the following outlines how this model can be used for the practical purposes mentioned in this essay. Additionally, an agenda for future research and application will be sketched out.

This paper began by addressing an ordinary situation that reflects a communicative misunderstanding. In this narrative, a young man expresses the dialectical tension of self-disclosure because “She [his girlfriend] does not know what I am doing here. She does not take time to be understanding.” This interviewee defines communication as “the act of showing, making another understand, talking, or expressing any signs to another individual about a message you want to relay,” which connects with a transmission conception rather than a ritual view of communication. He also points out that individual welfare is more important than that of a group and that “individuals shouldn’t sacrifice self-interest for the group”—beliefs that relate to an individualistic cultural trend (something that makes sense within a transactional view of communication). At this point, the traditions of thought included in the ritual (phenomenological, sociocultural) (or even the critical thought) could illuminate different points of view that might help the interviewee re-think the problem he is addressing (his girlfriend does not understand him) from different perspectives. For instance, how could the conceptual understanding of communication provide additional resources for better understanding his
communicative conflict? Phenomenology would underscore the importance of the real I-Thou encounter (and the threat of pseudo-communication contained in an I-It relationship) as well as the importance of partners as not individuals but as one “soul.” The sociocultural tradition would emphasize that reality is not just a transaction of information (or the “expression of a message”): this individual mentioned but also a common construction of meanings and, one might add, relationships. The critical perspective, finally, would show how institutions and particular contexts constrain (in his case, the university or the economic context) and distort understandings of the other.

As has been seen, the PMC offers resources for re-thinking problematic social situations from different points of view by first detecting the main metacommunicative trend and, secondly, showing what the rest of the traditions “say” about communicative conflicts. This is a modest step for better understanding human communication by empowering individuals with more intellectual resources for understanding relationships.

Some final considerations for the application of this meta-model. First, because of its constitutive character, the application of the PMC requires the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies that can explain the dynamism and symbolism of the way we talk, the tensions that appear in our interactions, and the most general values (culture) that frame these interactions.

Second, this proposal requires cross-cultural comparative studies so that “one is not caught in a form of ethnocentrism” (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 20). What do dialectics and (meta)communication look like across cultures? And how do different dialectics and (meta)communication work in different cultures? Rather than just noting how communication connects with culture and interaction in a single context (e.g. the US or Spain or Mexico, say), tone should “explain how broader values and economic realities may help explain the relationship/ variations across cultures” (Goodwin, 1999, p. 1) using communication as a mode of explanation. In order to capture the competing values and realities across relationships and cultures, a cross-cultural comparison is an appropriate methodological route to take. Because the metamodel is based on western traditions of thought, it is necessary to challenge its assumptions and overcome its limitations in an attempt of de-westernizing communication theory. For example, Gunaratne (2013, p. 166) proposes to open the philosophies of the Occident by “accepting the Chinese yin-yang principle embedded in the Yijing paradigm.” Also Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising built on Yijin are potentially “East ways” for constructing universal metatheories that include the West-centric atomistic focus and also the Asia-centric system oriented focus on the whole.

Finally, this paper “opens up” the metamodel with the goal of elucidating its importance for levels beyond the interpersonal, like an analysis of mass and social media. How do mass and social media talk “about” communication? What are the cultural trends present in news, TV shows, and/or social networks? What are the dialectical tensions that appear in these spaces? Since the model has been proposed for romantic relationships, it is not yet clear its applicability to other interpersonal contexts (e.g., political or religious dialog).

References


