

# Nietzsche, communication and the possibility of emancipation

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Communication has become an increasingly discussed concept in postmodernity. While commentators agree on the value of the concept, there is a wide range of views on the consequences of the concept: Vattimo sees communication as heralding a new type of society based on transparency,<sup>1</sup> while Habermas sees communication as a form of action with the potential for emancipation. In this paper, I will be questioning the possibility of the latter: to do this I will first examine Nietzsche's views on communication; then I will examine Nietzsche's use of communication as a critique of consciousness; finally offer a critical analysis of Habermas's project of communicative action in the light of the Nietzschean critique of communication.

The early writings of Nietzsche on language are chiefly concerned with rejecting the correspondence theory of truth and knowledge. On this account, the formation of the concept involves a process of eliminating differences and retaining what is common. This process is applicable both to things and to abstract ideas.<sup>2</sup>

'We obtain the concept as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us' (Nietzsche 1873: 83).

In effect, the concept is mistakenly said to represent the essences of things. However, accompanying this negative judgement of language is a positive thesis

1. Vattimo, (3. 1992. *The Transparent Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
2. The application of Nietzsche's theory of language to moral concepts is clearly shown in this passage from 'On Truth and Lying in an Extra Moral Sense': 'we call a person "honest." We ask, "Why did he act so honestly today?" Our answer usually goes: "Because of his honesty." Honesty! That means once more: the "leaf" is the cause of the leaves. For we know nothing of an essential quality called honesty; what we know are numerous, individualised, hence dissimilar, actions which we equate by omitting the dissimilar and then referring to them as honest action. Last of all, we formulate out of them a *qualitas occulta* with the name "honesty" (249).

whereby an instrumentalist view of language is suggested. In the notes for the course on *Ancient Rhetoric*, Nietzsche specifies the necessity of language as a medium for communication, but refrains from elaborating on this thesis. Elaboration is found in the later works -specifically in *The Gay Science* - which, whilst still adhering to and presupposing the rejection of the representational function of language, shifts priority to the function of language as a medium of communication, an origin located in the need to ensure survival

In describing language as a mode of communication, the early Nietzsche claims that prior to the development of verbal language we find that 'older than language is the mimicking of ~est<es~ which takes place involuntarily' (Nietzsche 1879:99). The 'mimicking of gestures' describes the process of non-verbal communication: the sensation felt by the individual is gesturally expressed with other individuals imitating these gestures and in so doing experiencing the same sensation

The imitated gesture leads him who imitates it back to the sensation which it expressed in the face or body of the person imitated. That is how people learned to understand one another: that is how a child still learns to understand its mother' (99).

Nietzsche's account relies upon the assumption that there is a naturalistic relation between gesture and sensation: it is vulnerable to the charge analogous to that usually labelled as the problem of other minds. In this latter problem, it is argued that we cannot infer, on the basis of our mental states and physical actions, that the physical states and mental states of others are similar. In fact, it is claimed that we cannot even assume that they have mental states. Likewise, in the case of Nietzsche's argument, it is hard to accept that just by observing the physical behaviour of others, then they will experience the same sensations as we do.

Language develops out of this primitive system of communication: the natural meaning of gestures is associated - conventionally - with a particular sound: with time, the sound was understood without the need for the accompanying gesture. 'I mean a sign-language of sounds could be so agreed that at first one produced sound *and* gesture (to which it was symbolically joined), later only the sound' (100). The importance of Nietzsche's claim is that both language and communication are reduced to the level of sensation: both verbal and non-verbal language are ultimately an expression of the sensations of pleasure (what is useful) and pain (what is harmful).

It is this pragmatic aspect of language which Nietzsche is concerned to show: within a life-threatening context, there is no question of interest in the nature of the world. Rather, philosophical considerations are outweighed by the necessity of communicating one's perception to the other. 'Language does not desire to instruct, but to convey to others a subjective impulse and its acceptance' (Nietzsche 1872–74: 21).

The condition of society is judged from the perspective of the way communication is used. Nietzsche opposes the communication of needs to the communication of knowledge as the framework for the analysis of society. This way of conducting a critique of society is elaborated upon in his essay on Wagner in *Untimely Meditations*. Language is 'sick' precisely because its original function has been replaced by another: instead of acting as a medium for the expression of human needs, language has developed as the expression of concepts. An 'unhealthy' society is one where language is used to express,

the realm of thought – a realm diametrically opposed to that for the expression of which it was originally supremely adapted namely the realm of strong feelings – it has during the brief period of contemporary civilisation become exhausted through this excessive effort. Man can no longer express his needs and distress by means of language, thus he can no longer really communicate at all' (Nietzsche 1876: 214).

The decline of contemporary society, according to Nietzsche, is rooted in the development of language for something other than its original purpose. Authentic communication cannot take place because rather than the communication of feelings, the communication of ideas has been valorised. Men are alienated from each other since genuine communication no longer takes place, 'that is to say from a mutual agreement as to words and actions without a mutual agreement as to feelings' (Nietzsche 1878:237).

But it is not a question – as Hazelcroft argues - of a conflict between language as the communication of feeling and language as the communication of thought originating in a 'fundamental tension within language itself' (Hazelcroft 1943:56). Instead, the question as to why language is abused of is answered by referring to the shifting values of society, which places greater value on knowledge than on feeling. The personal communicative use of language has been transformed into

the impersonal communication of thoughts: this development brings about a lack of personal involvement between individuals towards each other. Instead of attempting to understand each other's feelings, on establishing interpersonal relations, understanding is linked to what can be known.

The continuity of Nietzsche's thought on the necessity of language as the medium for the communication of human needs and feelings is evident not solely because it is textually warranted throughout his writings, but crucially because it is the obverse of his epistemological critique. Thus whilst the origin of language is not related to establishing the truth of things but to the communication of dangerous situations, this necessity ensures that the possibility of misunderstanding must be reduced to a minimum. 'The greater the danger, the greater is the need to reach agreement quickly and easily as to what has to be done; not to misunderstand one another in situations of danger is an absolute necessity in human relations,' (Nietzsche 1886:186).

Nietzsche's theory of communication links the intelligibility of language to its context. This is in fact one of the important claims put forward in the early *Truth and Lie* essay, where the establishment of linguistic meanings is ultimately a question of conventional agreement grounded in the context of survival. Mutual understanding between speaker and listener are ultimately the goal of communication. The later Nietzsche specifies the relation between meaning and social context, adopting a reductionist account of meaning by arguing that in order to understand and communicate we need a situation where the same basic experiences are shared,

'To understand one another it is not sufficient to employ the same words; we have also to employ the same words to designate the same species of inner experiences, we must ultimately have our experience in common. That is why the members of one people understand one another better than do members of differing peoples even when they use the same language' (Nietzsche 1886:14).

The importance of this passage is that it brings out the role of language as the expression of the shared experiences (as opposed to purely individual ones) of a community. The emphasis on the social makes the claims put forward by some interpreters hard to accept. In his book *Nietzsche and Political Thought* Warren claims that Nietzsche's account of language would lapse into a private language if it became so particular that it would express purely individual needs, (Warren 1991:56). This view is simply mistaken for it fails to acknowledge Nietzsche's

explicit concern with the social aspect of language. The goal of language, according to Nietzsche, is that of communicating those needs which are common to all individuals within a particular society.

Nietzsche's theory of communication is not only a general claim linking language to the context of its production, but a theory which specifies the relation between communication and context as one where the experiences which the community undergoes function as the crucial formative element in the production of language. The sharing of common experiential situations and their translation into language becomes the criteria which enables understanding to take place between different individuals within the same community.

Nietzsche's view on the concept of communication is developed into a thesis concerning the relation between communication and consciousness. According to Nietzsche, communication is the necessary condition for the development of consciousness. By following this line of argument, Nietzsche re-values the view of man as a subject whose subjectivity is defined by consciousness: it is, in effect, a critique of Cartesian philosophy.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche specifies: *V consciousness has developed only under the pressure of the need for communicating* (Nietzsche 1882: 298). The awareness of one's needs necessitates telling others about them: these needs originate in man's situation in a hostile environment where the likelihood of survival depends on the possibility of communicating his 'distress and to make himself understood' (298). Clearly, Nietzsche places communication as the basis of intersubjectivity: it is only because man is primarily a social being that consciousness develops as 'a net of communication between human beings' (298). Danto rightly points out that the individual with a sense of self comes into being only after his union into society: (Danto 980: 141-3); the identity of the individual as an individual and opposed to other individuals is the product of socialisation. Self-consciousness is the end result of the relationship between individuals in an environment which necessitates the possibility of articulating one's needs.

The further development from consciousness to selfconsciousness results from having acquired language. The possibility of communication is not only directed externally but also internally: 'the human being inventing signs is at the same time the human being who becomes ever more keenly conscious of himself. It was only as a social animal that man acquired self-consciousness' (Nietzsche 1882: 298).

Outside the human community the need for consciousness and consequently for language would not have arisen: man would have lived in a condition similar to that of animality, where actions are governed entirely by 'unconscious drives' (Nietzsche 1887:217). The transition from animality to that of humanity is characterised by the need to 'think, deduce, calculate, weigh cause and effect' (217). These functions are possible with the conscious, rational application of concepts. But whilst these activities are performed instinctively in the natural world, the socialised man performs them consciously so as to survive.

It is precisely because these activities take on a linguistic form that their value is lost, 'the thinking that rises to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this — the most superficial and worst part — for only this conscious thinking *takes the form of words, which is to say signs of communication*' (299). By showing that what is performed by consciousness can also be performed unconsciously, Nietzsche debunks the privilege of consciousness. The privileged status of consciousness is discredited because of its association with language.<sup>3</sup>

There is an evident shift of emphasis in Nietzsche's theory of language and communication. The nature of language itself, irrespective of the type of communication, constitutes an impoverishment of life. Because the language of a community is related to the sharing of similar experiences within a particular environment, the experiencing of certain 'conditions of life' provide the framework which generate the needs of the individual. The community is precisely the gathering of individuals with similar needs:

now supposing that need has at all times brought together only such human beings as could indicate similar requirements, similar experiences by means of similar signs, it follows that on the whole the easy *communicability* of need, that is to say ultimately the experiencing of only average and *common* experiences' (Nietzsche 1886:187).

But this, in effect, constitutes for Nietzsche a diminution: the sharing of a

3. The same point is repeated in the *Will to Power*: 'usually one takes consciousness itself as the general sensorium and supreme court; nonetheless, it is only a means of communication: it is evolved through social intercourse and with a view to the interests of social intercourse' (284). It is given that Nietzsche's point is to undermine the privileged status attributed to consciousness.

common language describes the loss of individuality. If communication implies mediocrity and consciousness is the product of communication, then conscious man is a mediocre being. It is clear therefore, that if consciousness is equated with language, and language is a product of the community, then 'whatever becomes conscious becomes by the same token shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, sign, herd signal' (299–300).

The type of community is intimately tied up with the language used in the community: because it expresses common needs, Nietzsche argues that it is characterised by 'herd' qualities. The consequences are negative: the 'subtle, select' individual tends to remain solitary on account of the difference between his experiences and needs from those of the 'herd'. The sharing of a common language in turn helps the 'herd' to promote itself: ultimately, Nietzsche claims, individuality is being lost at the expense of mediocrity.

This view on the mediocrity of the herd is paralleled to the views on language. Ordinary language is described in Nietzsche with reference to a fundamental principle: 'every concept originates by the equation of the dissimilar' (Nietzsche 1873:249). Nietzsche's assertion presupposes a radical nominalism such that each and every thing in the world is unique and individual; it is by negating what is particular that the condition of the possibility for the formation of the concept is met. The power of language is precisely that of operating a principle of identity, in so doing removing difference: things are postulated as identical precisely because the concept itself necessitates a selection of features of things which are merely similar but postulated as identical. It is man who sees things as similar in a world where difference reigns: language produces commonness both in the world, but also in society.

The innovation of Nietzsche's thought is that of formulating the critique of consciousness from a linguistically derived position. The claims of the later writings represent a further development with the thesis of language as a communicatory medium for the expression of human needs coupled with the rise of consciousness. It is here that we can understand Nietzsche's valorisation of language as communication, for this supports his radical critique of the subject-object duality: this duality is mistakenly justified on the grounds that it is consciousness that makes us aware of this duality. Whilst the early texts offer a critique of epistemology suggesting communication rather than knowledge at the origins of language, the later writings suggest communication as the key to the critique of consciousness.

Nietzsche's critique of communication has further implications for postmodernism. The relationship between language and power is one of the dominant themes of discussions within postmodernism. Interestingly, for Nietzsche, power is the starting point for theory of language: in the early writings Nietzsche recognises Aristotle's insight that the human being has an inherent, natural 'power' to create signs.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, he is not referring to political power as yet, but in the later writings, language itself becomes a product of the will to power, which in turn can be politically charged. It is in this respect that Nietzsche argues that language is value-loaded and therefore its use for communication can never be neutral. Power and language are intimately connected.

This idea finds resonance in the work of Lyotard: the narratives of the social legitimates its own power. Western civilisation has justified its practices by referring to a number of transcendental values inherited from the Enlightenment. These are what Lyotard calls the 'metanarratives' of history - the narratives of progress and freedom. In the contemporary world, Lyotard argues that the end of the metanarratives of western civilisation imply the decline of the justification of the western way of life and its imposition on others. Replacing the 'grand', universal narratives of the west, Lyotard points to 'mini', particular narratives: these are justified locally on social and historical grounds.

What Lyotard points to - and which Nietzsche had already described in his theory of language, - is that language lost or more precisely never had any representational power. Clearly, from our study of the origins of language 'the construction of identical cases reminds us of the nature of the concept: the 'error' Nietzsche alludes to is the error of believing in a representational model of language, i.e., believing that language grasps the essence of reality. This has been labelled as the crisis of representation: each language communicates the ideology of the dominant group as opposed to representing the world. Because all communication is ideologically slanted the act of communication is not neutral.

The use of communicative action for emancipation is also suspect when Lyotard equates reason with power: with Adorno and Horkheimer, his understanding of reason is that of an instrumentality which makes emancipation impossible: instrumental reason expresses itself through language and representation. While instrumental reason had been acknowledged and was the object of critique in *The*

4. See the Nietzsche's lectures on rhetoric in 'Description of Ancient Rhetoric' p. 9.

*Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard elaborates on its concrete effects: 'reason and power are one and the same thing. You may disguise the one with the dialectics or prospectiveness, but you will still have the other in all its crudeness: jails, taboos, public weal, selection, genocide' (Lyotard 1984:11).

The starting point of Habermas' thinking is his refusal to accept the renunciation of reason, the conclusion reached by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In their analysis of modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that instrumental reason had become the culminating element of the Enlightenment. As instrumental reason was described in terms of administrative efficiency, it had transformed the liberatory potential of the Enlightenment into a medium of oppression.

The work of Habermas can be seen as an attempt at rerouting reason: while he acknowledges the prevalence of instrumental reason, his objection to Adorno, Horkheimer and Lyotard is that there are other forms of rationality. On the extent and critique of instrumental reason, Habermas is in full agreement with the critics of modernity: he is, however, unwilling to accept this dominance as inevitable. Accepting the view that reason functions within a means-end excludes the possibility of liberation.

Habermas' strategy starts by relating different forms of reason to different forms of life. In particular, his theory links communication with reason: in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas develops the view that the medium of communication - language - inherently allows for the possibility of a use of reason that does not aim at domination. Linguistic communication is structured according to what Habermas calls 'validity claims': every act of communication involves mutual understanding between speakers and listeners, which in turn consolidates the intersubjectivity of human relations (morality and justice), establishes a relationship with the external world (truth) and expresses the speaker's intentions beliefs or feelings (sincerity)

Habermas makes it a point to differentiate between communication and communicative action: the latter presupposes the former but not vice-versa. It is because Habermas wants critical theory to be the instrument for social change that he lists four types of action: communicative action aims at mutual understanding, strategic action aims at instrumentality, normative actions aims at value-orientation and dramaturgical action aims at the presentation of one's self to others.

While communicative action takes place within the framework of linguistic communication, Habermas goes to great pains to establish the point that inherent in the very act of communication lies the possibility of mutual understanding, '*Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus*' (Habermas 1968:310).

By using mutual understanding via communication as his starting point, Habermas is able to justify the critique of those forms of communication that do aim at domination. Communicative action offers a model for the critique of 'distorted communication': this type of communication is ideological in that it is an expression of the values or ways of thinking of particular social groups. Power and domination are the hallmarks of 'distorted communication'

However, the question of whether communication leads to the possibility of emancipation in the way that Habermas describes it is highly debatable. It is on this point that Nietzsche's critique of communication becomes relevant: in describing language and its relation to the world, the question of power transforms itself across Nietzsche's writings.

In Nietzsche's unpublished writings on rhetoric, the possibility of language itself is described primarily as the 'power to discover and to make operative that which works' while the question of whom the power of language serves is alluded to as 'to convey to others a subjective impulse and its acceptance' (Nietzsche 1872-73: 21). In rejecting the traditional theory of language as picturing or corresponding to the world, Nietzsche theory emphasises the pragmatic dimension of language.

And insofar as language serves a practical function, it has political implications: it is the powerful who create language so as to communicate and dominate effectively. Power and domination – not consensus – are inherent in communication, with the action desired as that of obedience. It is this point which Nietzsche specifies in *The Genealogy of Morals*,

'the lordly right of bestowing names is such that one would almost be justified in seeing the origin of language itself as an expression of the rulers' power. They say, "This is that or that"; they seal off each thing and action with a sound and thereby take symbolic possession of it' (160).

It is therefore difficult to accept Habermas's view. On his account communication

is a neutral medium which can be used either for liberation - communicative action – or for domination – strategic action. But this is precisely what Nietzsche shows to be impossible: language can never be value-free as it is an expression of the prevalent ideological point of view.

This in turn brings out another weakness in Habermas's account: Habermas tries to reconcile contradictory positions: on the one hand he wants language to be a medium for liberation while on the other hand, the same language serves as a medium for domination. But it is evident that language cannot be both at the same time. Communication is itself primarily 'distorted' or biased towards some position of power: it reveals the impossibility of the Habermasian project.

The emphasis on communication in Nietzsche's theory of language is linked to the critique of language insofar as it is intended to offset the valorisation of epistemology and consciousness in modern philosophy. The need to communicate is grounded within an existential situation where the possibilities of survival are maximised. While shifting towards intersubjectivity through the linguistic medium, Nietzsche points to an inherent difficulty which this brings about. So as to function as a medium of communication, language inevitably brings about with it an equalisation process which reduces difference to identity. The nature of communication is such that it detracts from the qualitative nature of experience. The act of communication is in itself a falsification of reality and is therefore non-representational. Nietzsche's anticipation of postmodernity is elaborated upon by Lyotard – among others – who describes postmodernity as the end of the belief in the representational power of language. By way of reaction to Lyotard, Habermas re-values communication as the tool for the 'thinking after' of postmodernity. In the light of the Nietzschean analysis, however, it seems that Habermas's optimism is unfounded.

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