

## Ethical Aspects of Communication

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### Abstract

*Etické aspekty komunikace.* – Článek se zabývá problematikou etických aspektů komunikace, porozumění, nedorozumění a misinterpretace jako nedílné součásti řeči a výroku. Autorka se ptá po podstatě procesu komunikace, zvažuje dědictví jiných dob spolu s přijetím nejnovějších komunikačních technologií. Gadamerova hermeneutika zdůrazňující etiku, touhu porozumět druhým, přijímání jiných lidí a jejich práv, respekt a toleranci, stejně jako nutnost otevřenosti, přátelskosti a ochoty naslouchat je popsána jako základ předpokladu autentického dialogu. Zkoumána a diskutována je krize řeči nerespektující základní podmínky a pravidla. Gadamerovy postřehy k výkladu řeči a porozumění jsou popsány s důrazem na etický rozměr, stejně jako na oprávněnost různých výkladů, hledání konsensu a nutnost solidarity. Analýza důležitých výzkumu studentských esejů je věnována různým aspektům mezilidské komunikace zprostředkované jak přímo tak i technologicky, a poskytuje zcela názorný popis. Text je uzavřen identifikací autorky s Jaspersovými aspekty úspěšné komunikace.

**Keywords:** ethics, hermeneutics, communication, dialogue, speech, comprehension, understanding, essays, analysis

**Klíčová slova:** etika, hermeneutika, komunikace, dialog, řeč, porozumění, pochopení, eseje, analýza

### 1 Introduction

In our varied world we find space for understanding, (where there is common ground for the subject matter from which the communication arises and where the subjectivity of the communicators is queried), but also space for misunderstanding and conflicts. Immediate and also technically and technologically mediated adequate communication is a substantial prerequisite for creation of a space for comprehension.

Watzlawick formulated preliminary communication axioms: a man cannot but communicate. Every communication includes aspects of content and relation, where the relation aspect determines the content one. A man communicates in both digital and analogue forms. Communication processes are structured either symmetrically or complementarily.

When taking into consideration the ethical aspects of communication we also assume mutual respect between partners, we strengthen the idea of integrity of selfhood, we look for the balance between closeness and distance and we take into account the dignity of man.

Communication is more often understood as an interpersonal process but it can also be understood as a process of adopting the legacy of other times, other cultures, as a linking process via ICT and also as the process of internal dialogue with oneself, as a process in

which we can start feeling insecure and as a result we can stop and look at the same thing from a different angle – to exceed the original approach, to blend the simple and the unique with superior units, to overlap the utilitarian necessity. Transcendence is then achieved by crossing the horizons; it means interconnecting ourselves with the prospects of the community and world as units; it is based on the insight into otherness and is conditioned by communication.

## **2 Ethical aspects of communication**

### 2.1 Potential ethical approaches to communication issues

Potential ethical approaches to communication are: the approach of descriptive ethics – describes what values, norms, opinions, and judgements and their frequency occur in a given community; the approach of prescriptive, normative ethics – formulates values, norms, codes, which should be followed in people's behaviour; the approach of analytical ethics – focuses on the analysis of the language of ethically relevant statements, is closely linked with philosophy and linguistics; it scrutinizes the language in which ethical contents are formulated and aims at removal of misunderstandings and ambiguities; the approach of situational ethics – scrutinizes and assesses solutions of ethical problems in concrete situations; hermeneutic approach – intersection of findings and links brought by other approaches, focuses on the issues of a dialogue, communication, understanding and comprehension.

### 2.2 Gadamer's universal hermeneutics

The selected theoretical ground is therefore the Gadamer's universal hermeneutics. Gadamer's hermeneutics has had since the 1960s an enormous influence on the development of philosophy and ethics, namely as for a significant shift towards language, when continental European confronted at once the language of philosophy and the ethics of the Anglo-saxon world. This hermeneutics also rehabilitated practical philosophy, in particular the ethics of duty.

Gadamer stresses the importance of live communication which is linked with the effort to not close oneself into oneself and to try to listen to other people, to be open to their opinions and ideas, provided our willingness to listen to other people does not exclude our communication and exchange of ideas or in their modification to fill our desire for understanding others, world and ourselves. According to Gadamer the essential prerequisite for uncovering understanding is the acceptance of the other person, respect for others as well as oneself and tolerance towards otherness and dissimilarities.

#### *2.2.1 Problem of speech in modern hermeneutics*

A speech narrates and interprets a situation and helps you understand yourself and others. "The possibility that the other person is right is the spirit of hermeneutics..." (Gadamer 1999) and the basis of hermeneutical ethics. Gadamer's belief is the starting point for a meaningful dialogue and ethically based communication.

The problem of speech in modern hermeneutics follows explanations of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, where we meet the belief that speech is capable of storing and under given circumstances also giving out the mysteries of existence. Speech is then the bearer of the mysteries of existence and at the same time the key to its understanding. Gadamer's hermeneutics ceases to be one of the philological disciplines and becomes a complex and independent philosophical and ethical stream where speech takes on a crucial position. Speech enables us to understand not only texts as such, but also ourselves, our decisions, values and norms, as well as other people and the surrounding world provided one is sufficiently open and outgoing. The original "understanding speech" is supplemented and sometimes replaced by "understanding through speech".

Speech can be seen as the expression of mind/soul which includes thematisation of ethical issues – namely consciousness as the expression of its use in a specific community. It takes into account that in communities there are certain rules for the usage of words and speech and at the same time people do not mean the same thing when using the same words which is the result of their evaluative and cognitive processes. It is also an area which covers the issue and importance of conventions in communication.

### 2.2.2 *Dialogic search of knowledge*

Hermeneutics is not just the art of interpretation, it should mediate information which does not hinder understanding, but it facilitates it. Friendliness, openness and willingness to listen are the common grounds for a dialogue the role of which is to lead to mutual understanding.

Understanding is a life process (*Lebensvorgang*), which is formed in the life of every community and social unit (*Lebensgemeinschaft*).

Communication, and in particular verbal communication, can show the world in such a way that it looks familiar and common to all of us. Speech and communication are interlinked and inseparable, with mutually depended existence. Speech is not a mere means of communication. (*Wahrheit und Methode.*) Speech is not a tool mastered by man which would be here for your disposal because you cannot step out of it.

The pursuit to understand each other in a dialogue can be compared to a game with at least two participants. The rules are given. Understanding and communication can only be carried out in an authentic dialogue. Pseudodialogues give no opportunity for communication – one pushes his opinion against the opinion of the other.

### 2.2.3 *Speech crisis*

Hermeneutic ethics is also discussed by other authors (e.g. Gerhard Ebeling), who concentrate their attention on the crisis of speech. This crisis looks like a chaining crises of various types always connected with communication and speech.

Resulting from such a chain is the main problem of the speech crisis; the crisis of the ability to make oneself understood which is caused by disrupting the basic rules of the process of dialogue. Obscuring instead of clarifying, often due to the desire of the speaker to look

different and to draw attention to himself, is often caused by use of international or professional jargon which others do not know or can use to explain the meaning in a different way. There is no doubt that this crisis is influenced by the ethical and axiological orientation of the communicators in the dialogue.

This crisis is characterized by a loss of content value of the speech itself and numerous misunderstandings as well as by word inflation – an excessive number of words that blur and make the utterance diffuse. This in turn creates a crisis of trust – this word is no longer valid – and a Crisis of conscious – one disrespects promises, oaths, one does not feel to be obliged by duty or responsibility.

#### *2.2.4 Mechanisation of speech*

“Technicality of Speech” and its ethical implications: disruption and destruction of the speech process as the process of uncovering secrets and mutual understanding are caused by the technicality of speech and its technical treatment in general. Technicalized speech has nothing to do with the language of fiction, the history of literature, the folklore legacy or its roots. The lexical need for basic information transfer does not have to be extensive. The lexical minimum as it is usually stated consists of about 2000 words. Reductionism and the poverty of speech lead us astray and we do not try to understand otherness and tend to forget the search for meaning.

#### *2.2.5 Speech and comprehension*

Gadamer points out that poetic language is the last island in speech itself, where man has not intervened by any technological or manipulative way and is therefore the most natural and most open way, how to understand the world, other people and ourselves. When behaving naturally we express our effort towards the world to maintain speech and let the world emerge from it. When failing to do so, we start creating barriers in communication.

#### *2.2.6 Speech and understanding*

Speech is understood as “logos” showing us the way in knowledge and understanding; it also sets the rules. Speech is a universal medium where understanding is manifested in interpretation. This leads us to the issue of the relationship between understanding and interpretation. Gadamer mentions that interpretation is not equal to mere understanding of the utterance, but it also contains the idea of something essential.

Gadamer is aware of some interpretation of variabilities of the same event and the same utterance. Interpretation of the utterance must be understood with regard to the situational context because the meaning is not unchangeable. In such circumstances the idea of the hermeneutic circle can be applied. Gadamer strives to get the most complex view of various aspects of interpretation, he is aware of the fact that the impact of great many factors and influences are so complex that they can hardly be comprehended as a whole. In addition, the form and level of our language skills have to be taken into consideration. The ethical dimension of this paper emphasises the rightfulness of various interpretations and the search for consensus and strengthening of solidarity.

“This type of rationality, expressing in its sense the communicative togetherness and solidarity inside a community, is according to Gadamer, of an objective, general as well as of a concrete character.” (Hroch 2010)

*2.2.7 Frequency analysis of motives in students' essays on issues of ethical aspects of communication*

The issue of ethical aspects of communication with regard to interpersonal, intrapersonal and public communication was discussed in 2008–2012 by students of UK PedF. 189 assessed essays gave grounds for inspiration and discussion (students stated more relevant motives in their papers). On the grounds of frequency analysis the typology of ethical aspects of communication (direct, technically and technologically mediated) was worked out.

*2.2.7.1 Overview of overall results of frequency analysis*

The vast majority of essays (159) were devoted to interpersonal communication – both direct and technically or technologically mediated. Communication conditioned by information and communication technologies was a part of 107 essays in at least one ethically relevant motif. Ethical aspects of communication in the sense of the impact of media on people represented the dominant theme in 27 students' papers. The effort to think about intrapersonal communication prevailed in three essays only.

We follow the occurrence of relevant expressions in the context of the discussed issues in the analysed essays if they appear there more than once.

*2.2.7.2 Graphic presentation*

Number	%	
188	99,47	truth, lie
187	98,94	half-truth, concealment
179	94,71	trust, trustworthiness
164	86,77	respect, respect to others, frankness
151	79,89	freedom, self-esteem
138	73,02	honesty
116	61,38	tolerance, politeness, courtesy
101	53,44	conscious, self-confidence, confidence
93	49,21	solidarity, sharing, sense of belonging
79	41,80	arrogance, haughtiness putting on airs
65	34,39	faul
52	27,51	manipulation, communication tricks
48	25,40	partiality, bias, prejudices
39	20,63	justice, fairness
31	16,40	dialogue, interest in others
30	15,87	wrong, guilt, remorse

27	14,29	tact, discreetness, secrecy
23	12,17	technology and communication, interconnection, interlinks
21	11,11	dignity
20	10,58	egocentrism, selfishness
18	9,52	liking, personal dislikes
15	7,94	understanding, mutual understanding, comprehension
12	6,35	self-understanding
11	5,82	thoughtfulness, responsibility
9	4,76	helpfulness, reliability

As a matter of interest we can also mention expressions reflecting the title of the essays the occurrence of which can serve as ground in at least two works: seeking common speech, communication barriers, parallel monologues, pseudo dialogues, communication crisis, vulgarity, aggressivity, primitivism, social networks, humour, smile, criticism, self-criticism, reflection and self-reflection, etiquette and netiquette, equality, correctness, promise, commitment/obligation, indifference, privacy, disappointment, failure, compassion, allegation, accusation, mocking, slander, condemnation, pretention, threatening, pressure, inducement, coercion, name-calling, humiliation, insult, verbal offence, irony, sarcasm, willingness, desire for mutual understanding, ruthlessness, embarrassment, alertness, superficiality, hidden identity, salutation, greeting, success, pride, boredom, jumping into speech, shyness, assertivity, fictitious friendship, racism, feminism.

Expressions with rare occurrence: being a gentleman, diplomatic expressions, etiquette of translation and interpreting, asymmetric responsibility, rashness, precipitation, the art of listening, the art of not bothering, clarification of word meaning, feedback, authoritative communication, stimulation of desire.

### 2.2.7.3 *Typology of most frequent ethical aspects in communication*

We should speak the truth. It is a duty to speak the truth.	42
There is no white lie.	39
Each of us has lied in life.	39
A white lie is justifiable. We do not want to hurt, so we tell a lie.	31
A courtesy lie which can prevent panic or disaster is excusable.	31
Even a little lie which comes out can hurt.	27
Our conscious must come to terms with lies.	21
To reveal or not to reveal the truth depends on the situation and person.	21
I would not wish my partner to tell lies to me.	18
I would not wish my doctor to lie to me.	17
One should always tell the truth, but it depends on when and how.	15
Lies are misleading and therefore unacceptable.	15
Lies make fools of other people.	13
Am I responsible for the results of telling the truth/lie? NO 4/ YES 7	11
Is it possible nowadays in our society not to tell lies? NO 5/ YES 6	11
If we are honest, we are vulnerable.	10
The trustworthiness of media is questionable.	10

I am cautious as for the information in the media.	9
Media often manipulate the reader, viewer, listener.	9
The most manipulative manifestations can be seen in advertising and political propaganda.	9
Lies are by the very nature always bad.	9
Lies, half-truth and concealment that appear in the media can have serious consequences.	9
We lose confidence in people who have lied to us.	9
Sincerity is dangerous and naïve, but probably more moral than insincerity.	8
Relations with other people should be based on respect and esteem.	8
It is important to talk to people not just to the point.	8
Face to face communication is more valuable and fruitful than communication via technologies.	7
There are forgivable and excusable lies.	7
I do not condemn white lies.	7
There are many unethical manifestations of communication on the Internet, in particular: vulgarity – 7; aggression – 6; arrogance – 3; disrespect for other people – 2.	7
We do not expect that a small innocent lie could result in bad consequences.	6
Prerequisites to come to understanding are the volition and willingness to understand each other.	6
A man sometimes is not willing to understand.	6
A man sometimes is willing to understand, but he is not able to do so.	5
The rules of etiquette should apply to both real and virtual environment.	5
To come to mutual understanding and comprehension is very difficult, but we have to do our best.	5
Many conflicts are based on misunderstanding.	4
There are people where discussion is out of question.	4
Communication via social network is with youngsters more frequent now than face to face.	3
Today's pace of life degrades the ethics of communication.	3
People are not frank enough, they pretend and tell lies.	3
Very few people are familiar with the rules of correct communication. If they do know them, they do not respect them.	2
The willingness to communicate is a way to others and also to oneself.	2
All of us are in a constant dialogue with oneself.	2
A dialogue means interest in others, their feelings, attitudes and feelings.	2

The issue of truth and lie is significantly dominant, with related 392 statements, followed by the issue of the media – 37 and the issue of understanding – 26.

#### *2.2.7.4 Authentic statements of students*

“We know we lie, we know it is wrong and yet we do that. Why?” (Student 23, 2008); “A lie with which you want to protect someone can hurt more than the truth.” (Student 22, 2010); “What kind of world would we live in, if we were not willing to understand each other?” (Student 21, 2010); “A threat to communication is a threat to humanity.” (Student 21, 2012); “Misunderstanding can also happen when a person – usually in an attempt to express himself accurately and to defend his opinion is too focused on it too single minded, when he speaks to the point but not to the listeners. We speak to the point only, moving away from the possibility to be understood by others.” (Student 23, 2012); “Whenever saying anything we have to follow our conscious and put ourselves in the shoes of other people we should think about what we say and do in order not to hurt anyone unnecessarily, we should not cause troubles for our friends nor strangers. We are misled by politicians and media, so at least we should strive in personal communication to speak the truth and respect each other.” (Student 21, 2012)

#### *2.2.7.5 Additional notes and observations to the issues of ethical aspects of communication in the virtual environment*

Students’ assessment of technical possibilities are mostly positive, they regard as essential that all communicators are equal in the virtual environment (27) that they can comfortably get information and thanks to that they can formulate their opinions, (19), and can compensate for handicaps in communication (15), meeting the meaning of the word “communicare” which means sharing, debating, meeting (11) when in time pressure they prefer “meeting” (5). However, they are aware of the risks of ever more significant substitution of personal contact (23), which can lead to superficiality, banality, non-committal communication (19) as well as the decline of communication culture (14), hidden identity, and the creation of a false one; it can lead to pretense reaching even criminal dimensions (8).

#### *2.2.7.6 Additional notes and observations on the issues of ethical aspects of communication between teachers and learners*

Considering that all essays were written by students of the pedagogical faculty, it is understandable that a part of the material deals with ethically relevant motives in the communication between teachers and students. Students emphasize the dialogue as a partners’ dialogue (21), assuming that it is the task of the teachers to facilitate the effort for understanding (15) with considerable importance of respect and tolerance (12). They also deal with the issue of accountability (7). These results interestingly enough correspond with the data of other research which covered the desired qualities of a teacher. This research was carried out in 2009–2012 in connection with teaching professional and hermeneutic ethics. The total number of respondents was 235. From the ethical viewpoint the required dominant characteristics should be justice (235), responsibility (235), frankness (169), honesty (168), no arrogance (144), serenity (115), attentiveness (97), faith in the abilities of students (69), keeping promises (67), willingness to listen (48), helpfulness (43), kindness (36), willingness to help (25).



### 3 Conclusion

The results of this partial research serve to provide a common ground of communication in order to address matters which need clarification in seminars with our students, to make our efforts come from a place of mutual acceptance, respect, openness and trust.

We strive to meet in the real sense of the meaning and to communicate with one another fully and authentically. I identify myself with Jaspers concept of the need to communicate and willingness to communicate. Should I formulate the credo of my life and teaching then it would be: "Unlimited willingness to communicate is not the result of learning, but a decision on the way in human existence. The idea of communication is not utopia, but faith; it is a question for each of us if one strives in this direction and believes in it, but not as in something from another world, but as something in something entirely present: the possibility of us people to really live together, to speak with each other and through this to reach the truth and first on this way to become truly ourselves." (Jaspers 1994)

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