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DASCAL ON INTERPRETATION AND UNDERSTANDING¹

Our species has been *hunting for meaning* ever since we departed from our cousins in the evolutionary tree (p. ix).

This paper is a review of Marcelo Dascal's book *Interpretation and Understanding* (2003), which collects a series of papers published by Dascal on various topics related to the pragmatics of communication and, in particular, to the hearer's task of grasping meaning. The present work aims at discussing some relevant issues which emerge in the volume, such as the concept of *communicative action* (with the related notions of *commitment* and *involvement*), and a deepening of the different possible types of *individual* and *collective actions*. Moreover, a typology of difficult cases of communication is presented, ranging from simple *indirect communication*, to *misunderstandings*, *conflicts* and *controversies*; in these cases, a particular effort in understanding is required.

Keywords: communicative action, commitment, interpretation, (mis)understanding, conflict, controversy.

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¹ Dascal, M. (2003). *Interpretation and Understanding*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins: 714 pages.

1. Introduction

The thirty chapters of this volume represent a collection of a series of papers, published by Marcelo Dascal in the last three decades, concerning the *pragmatics of communication* or *sociopragmatics*². The author's aim is analyzing the fundamental "abilities" (see p. x) involved in communication: the speaker's ability of conveying his/her communicative intentions, and the hearer's ability to recognize them. In particular, this book is devoted to the topic of meaning *interpretation and understanding*, i.e. with the tasks of the hearer in the communication process, which can succeed even in cases where the task of interpreting is not trivial, and successful communication seems difficult to be achieved.

The book is divided into three main parts: the first one concerning the theoretical examination of some fundamental notions of pragmatics (going from the notion of *communicative intention*, to the problem of understanding, to the role of the context in interpretation, to the functioning of textual connectives); the second one applying those concepts to different areas of verbal and non-verbal communication (from legal interpretation, to controversies, to literature and art, and even to artificial intelligence, just to mention some of the contexts that are examined); and, finally, the third one devoted to the interdisciplinary effort of integrating pragmatics with relevant insights from other disciplines (such as conversation analysis, semantics, rhetoric, and hermeneutics). As technical instruments for supporting this comprehensive effort, the author has added a detailed introduction (pp. IX-XXII) to the collection of his papers, which includes a description of the contents of each chapter, and provides connectives that help follow the discourse development from one chapter to another; and a network of links and cross-quotations, which constitutes a valid instrument for grasping the 'hypertextual' connections between the various topics.

The goal of my review article is to identify some cross-chapter topics, and to concentrate on some specific spots in the rich materials provided by the author. In particular, I intend to focus on some themes that appear particularly relevant from the point of view of Communication sciences: the

² According to Dascal, *sociopragmatics* is the discipline that investigates "the social, other-oriented uses of semiotic systems" (see p. 412), and it is thus linked to communication. As such, it can be distinguished from *psychopragmatics*, which concerns rather the internal, "private" use of semiotic systems, and to *ontopragmatics*, which studies "the grounding of language in existence and of existence in language" (*ibid.*).

notions of commitment and involvement in communication; individual and collective actions; and the topic of 'difficult communications', where understanding becomes, for various reasons, problematic, and which might go from simple misunderstandings, to conflicts and controversies.

2. Communication in action: commitment and involvement

According to Dascal, *pragmatics* is the discipline that studies "the use of linguistic (or other) means through which a speaker conveys his communicative intentions and a hearer recognizes them" (pp.8-9). Communication is ruled, on the side of the speaker, by the duty of making oneself understood; and, on the side of the hearer, by the duty of understanding. In this framework, communication is understood as a type of interaction³ between human beings, trying to convey and to understand *meaning*. Although many models of meaning interpretation have been put forward in various disciplines⁴, pragmatics can give a unique contribution in explaining human communicative behaviour. For this purpose, the notion of *communicative action* turns out to be essential: "The reason I am particularly fond of the pragmatic model is that it is concerned with preserving the ecological niche of an endangered species, namely man as the responsible, free, rational agent/subject who – at least sometimes – intentionally originates and is the master of his/her actions" (p. 208).

At this point, distinguishing the notions of *commitment* and *involvement*, which characterize the interagents' free participation to the communicative exchange, and determine the ties between them, turns out to be particularly relevant⁵.

Commitments are bound to the illocutionary force (in Searle's terms) of the speakers' speech acts. The speaker's commitments do not depend on his/her mental states, but are directly implied by the speech acts that he/she performs. Making a promise commits the speaker to the obligation of fulfilling it, whether he/she sincerely holds this intention or not⁶.

³ On the role of pragmatics in understanding human communication, and on the notion of communicative intentions, see in particular Chapter I (*Pragmatics and communicative intentions*, first published in 1999).

⁴ In particular, Chapter IX (*Models of interpretation*, first published in 1992) is devoted to the models of human understanding, and to the contribution that pragmatics can bring to the study of this problem.

⁵ See chapter 7 (*Commitment and involvement*, first published in 1989, with T. Katriel).

⁶ In this sense (see p. 156), "Full" or 'genuine' or 'true' commitments are in fact nothing but 'commitment cum involvement', and [...] one can have the one without the other".

Thus, commitment is not a degree-concept, because changing a commitment does not mean changing one's disposition towards the addressee or towards the uttered contents; it means changing the illocutionary force itself of the speech acts⁷.

The notion of *involvement* refers to the interagents' disposition and mode of participation in the communicative exchange. Here, since a speaker can be more or less personally involved, it is clear that involvement is a matter of degree. The speakers' involvement concerns, on the one hand, the topics of the interaction, i.e. the issues the interagents are discussing on (in this case, we speak of a *topical involvement*); and, on the other hand, the personal relation between the interagents (*interactional involvement*)⁸.

From what we have seen, it is clear that, whereas involvement is a mental state, commitment is a social state, depending on the externalized speech activities performed by the interagents⁹.

⁷ See p. 159: "In sum, commitment, like knowledge and flatness, is an absolute concept. Either one is committed or not, either one knows that p or not, either a surface is flat or not – there are no degrees in these matters, just as there is no degree in being pregnant".

⁸ Here, Dascal stresses the social – or relational – dimension of communication, where the relationships between the interagents as human beings and members of certain group or communities emerge as relevant beyond the topic of the conversation. See pp. 161-163 for a discussion of the contribution by microsociology for understanding rules of communication in different social contexts.

⁹ See p. 160: "'Commitment' refers to what the speaker can be said to have 'taken for granted' in making his or her utterance; 'topical involvement', on the other hand, refers to that which occupies the speaker's field of consciousness at the time of talk". The social nature of commitments is highlighted within the Pragma-dialectical model of argumentation (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004:54-55): "Instead of concentrating on the psychological dispositions of the language users involved in the resolution process, we concentrate primarily on their commitments, as they are externalized in, or can be externalized from, the discourse or text. Externalization of commitments is in pragma-dialectics achieved by investigating exactly which obligations are created by (explicitly or implicitly) performing certain speech acts in a specific context of an argumentative discourse or text. In this way, terms such as "accept" or "disagree" take on a "material" sense: they do not primarily stand for being in a certain state of mind, but for undertaking public commitments". The fact that commitments are social phenomena has made this notion central for the development of languages for artificial agents. On this point, see Colombetti, Fornara & Verdicchio (2004), and Fornara, Viganò & Colombetti (2004). These authors exploit the notion of commitment for constructing a language allowing the interaction between artificial agents. In this framework, the social and institutional features of commitment are stressed. Dascal tackles the topic of a language for artificial agents, also focusing on the relevance of commitment in Chapter XVIII (*Why does language matter to Artificial Intelligence?*, first published in 1992); see in particular p. 431.

3. Individual and collective actions

Since communication is not an individual action, but rather a kind of *joint action* (in the sense of Clark 1996), where more than one agent is involved, and since ‘pure’ individual actions are quite rare, and less significant, whereas communication pervades human social life and is an essential condition for it, it is particularly relevant to shed some light on those cases where two or more individuals act together. In particular, Dascal explores the field of *collective actions*, which take place where two or more agents share a common goal, and act in order to reach it¹⁰. Collective actions require communication between agents.

Collective actions, thus, are a particular form of joint actions, where agents *cooperate*¹¹ in order to achieve a certain shared goal. Dascal defines this process as a *collective decision-making* (p.112), where in fact a common goal is pursued by two or more agents. However, Dascal notices that having a shared intention is not sufficient for performing a collective action; rather, agents also need to have the awareness of their belonging to a ‘group’ of people who share that goal; in other words, their shared intention must also refer to a collective “we” of the group¹². Imagine, for instance, a group of people who suddenly stand up together; in order for this standing up to be a collective action, each member of the group should have had a prior intention¹³ which could be described as follows:

¹⁰ See Chapter V (*Individual and collective intentions*, first published in 1989, with A. Idan).

¹¹ Among possible forms of joint actions, Rigotti, Rocci & Greco (2004:12-14) distinguish between *cooperation*, where two or more co-agents share the same goal, and *interaction*, where two or more inter-agents have different but complementary goals. In the case of interaction, thus, the action of an inter-agent realizes the desire of the other, and *viceversa*.

¹² We could say that agents need to refer to a certain *common ground* that defines their identity as a group intentionally pursuing a certain goal. Robert Stalnaker employs the expression *common ground* to refer to the shared background of information that is presupposed by the interlocutors at a certain stage of a conversation: “To presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information – as *common ground* among the participants in a conversation” (Stalnaker 2002: 701, but see also Stalnaker 1974). Van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004: 60) include into the common ground also some non-informational elements: “In the opening stage [of a critical discussion], the parties to the difference of opinion try to find out how much relevant common ground they share (as to the *discussion format, background knowledge, values, and so on*) in order to be able to determine whether their procedural and substantial “zone of agreement” is sufficiently broad to conduct a fruitful discussion”. In our case, the speakers’ feeling of being a “we” (the speakers’ *weness*) cannot be considered a shared information; it seems rather to concern an aspect of relational nature.

¹³ The author re-elaborates the notions of *prior intention* and *intention-in-action* from

“I have an intention in action which is a presentation of my standing up, which causes me to stand up and which is caused by this prior intention, which, in its turn, is caused by a prior intention of our standing up together” (se pp. 107-108)¹⁴.

The author proposes a typology of collective actions, in order to characterize the different possible meanings of *collective intention*. The typology is based on two dimensions: the existence of a prior intention (PI) and/or of an intention in action (IA), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the level of awareness of the sharing of these intentions between the group’s members.

Even if there is no collective PI between the members of the group, there could be a collective IA: in this case, a ‘spontaneous’ collective action is generated. For instance, if it begins to rain, all people walking in an open field will run to a nearby house in order to cover from the rain, sharing thereby a non-premeditate IA (p. 105). However, the canonical case of collective action – the ‘non-spontaneous’ collective action - involves the sharing of a PI. It is the case of a group of people who have a common goal, and decide to pursue it: this situation covers a wide range of cases, from the football team trying to win the World Cup, to the family who decides to go to Crete on holiday, to the common decision of two cooks to open a new restaurant together... In this case, the collective action can be either ‘overt’, if the co-agents have previously agreed on the PI, i.e. if they actually share the high-level intention; but it can also be ‘covert’ (*manipulative*), if there is some kind of leadership that arbitrarily guides the group without revealing his/her “further intentions”. In the case of ‘covert’ collective actions, therefore, the sharing of a certain PI is actually exploited for further reasons (for the

Searle’s account of the individual action. The notion of *prior intention* refers to the “intentions that are formed prior to an action” (Searle 1983:44), whereas the term *intention-in-action* refers to “the intention I have while I am actually performing an action” (ibid.).

¹⁴ This is generated by the “integrated force configuration” of the group. Dascal considers (pp. 112-114) how this collective force configuration is on its turn generated (in particular, he refers to the model proposed in the works of K.J Arrow (1963 and 1967). Concerning the possible range of collective actions, at the one extreme we have the case of the dictatorial society, where the problem of having a collective intention is reduced to the identification of the dictator’s intention (here, we do not have collective intentions, but only an individual intention that has binding implications for the whole society). At the other extreme, we have completely uniform societies or groups, where all individuals must have the very same intention before making a collective decision. In these cases, persuasion plays an essential role, as a mean to bring the others to accept a certain proposal. Between these extremes, there is a wide range of cases, where the problem of the formation of collective intentions must still be further deepened (see p. 114).

pursuing of *further-intentions*) by a sub-group of agents. In this case, some agents are in fact manipulated, because they think to share a common intention with their counterpart, but actually they are 'exploited' as instruments for realizing the others' further intentions. Both in the case of covert and in the case of overt non-spontaneous collective actions, the co-agents can have either the same IA (in this case, an 'uniform' collective action takes place) or different IA, thus reaching their goal through a sort of *division of labour* (in this case, a 'complementary' collective action takes place). We speak of a *uniform collective action*, for instance, when a group of hikers decide to climb together on the top of a mountain: in this case, each hiker performs the same actions as the others to realize their collective intention. A *complementary collective action* takes place, for instance, when a football team engages in a match: here, each player has his own task, but their actions are complementary aiming at winning the match.

The overall typology of collective actions can be represented as follows (see p. 107):

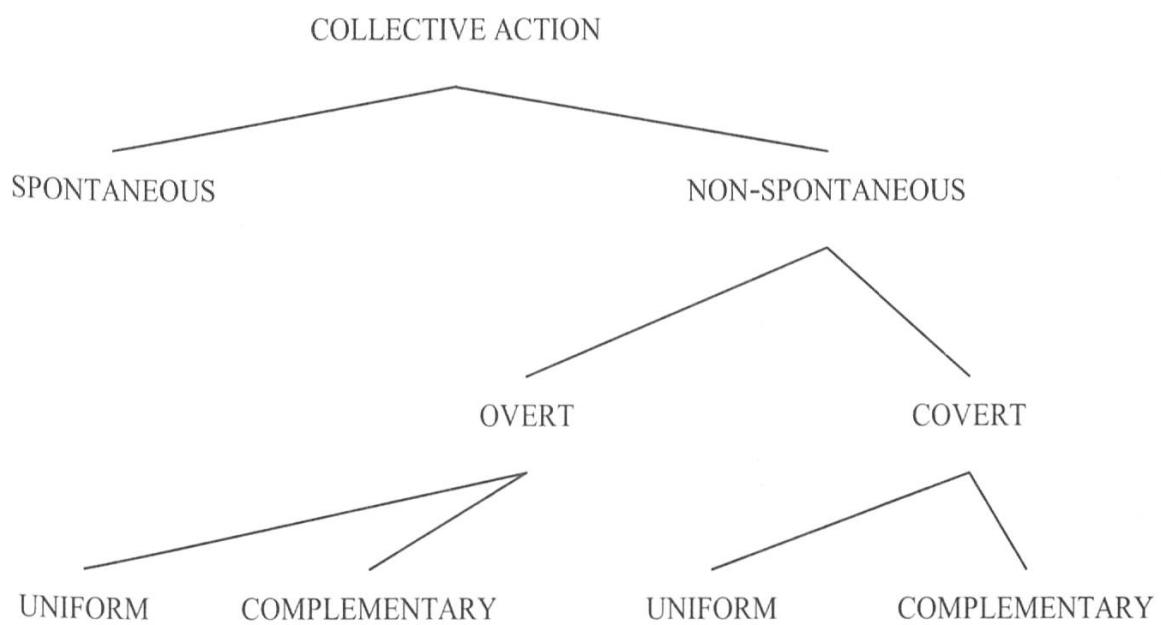


Fig. 1: Typology of collective actions

4. Difficult communications

The problem of interpretation and understanding is particularly intriguing when some problems or even conflicts emerge in communication. Through the whole book, Dascal analyses a series of cases of difficult communications, which I propose to order in a sort of “hierarchy” that goes from indirect communication to proper conflicts.

Indirect communication

The phenomenon of indirect communication is surely widespread in human interaction. Indeed, indirect speech acts and ambiguity are rather ‘normal’ phenomena¹⁵, which the speakers are used to tackling with: “In ‘normal’ adult communication, non-transparency is thus the standard assumption, and there is no way to escape the need for a ‘pragmatic interpretation’ of a communicative act [...]. It follows, then, that the duty imposed upon the addressee resembles the solution of a problem with an unknown, whose value he is supposed to determine: the determination of such a value is the process of ‘interpretation’ of the communicative act, which is supposed to yield the required understanding” (p. 83)¹⁶. A specific context where interpretation is crucial is the legal field, to which Dascal devotes two studies (see Chapter XVa, *Transparency and doubt: understanding and interpretation in pragmatics and in law*, first published in 1998, with J. Wróblewski), and Chapter XVb, *The rational lawmaker and the pragmatics of legal interpretation*, first published in 1991, with J. Wróblewski). The judge in a legal process has the duty to correctly interpret the law in order to apply it to the specific case he is evaluating: “Interpretation is required, first and foremost (but not only), when a legal text is not ‘transparent’ or clear enough in the concrete situation of

¹⁵ The author, for instance, deepens the topics of interpretation of art (see Chapter XXVII, *Understanding art*, first published in 1985), of metaphors (see Chapter XI, *Understanding a metaphor*, first published in 1996), and of jokes and dreams (see Chapter XVI, *Understanding jokes and dreams*, first published in 1985). For other insights on the effects of indirectness in communication, see also the interesting paper of Wüest (2001), who analyzes the use of indirect speech acts as a strategy generally employed in advertising texts.

¹⁶ Dascal devotes part of his work to the analysis of the role of context as source for determining the ‘unknown value’ of the implicit aspects in communication. See for instance Chapter VIII (*Cues, clues and context*, first published in 1987-VIIIa and 1991-VIIIb, with E. Weigand) and also Chapter XXIX (*Hermeneutic interpretation and pragmatic interpretation*, first published in 1989; see in particular p. 625).

its use" (p. 343)¹⁷. And, in the process of interpretation, the judge presupposes that the legal system has been originated from the will of a *rational lawmaker*, who established a reasonably well-founded legal system: "The lawmaker is rational precisely in so far as the process whereby he/she takes his/her decisions is supported to be entirely guided by explicit and deductive justificatory arguments" (p. 342).

Misunderstandings

A higher level of complexity emerges in cases of misunderstanding, i.e. when the process of interpretation falls into some kind of error. Misunderstandings can occur at each stage of a conversation¹⁸, and can be related to the speaker, the interlocutor, or the interaction between them; in most cases, however, misunderstandings are detected and corrected by the interlocutors themselves. This is possible thanks to the attitude of cooperation between the interlocutors, who assume a "charitable attitude" (p. 297) based on mutual trust between responsible individuals (p. 298). As they share the goal of making the interaction succeed, they focus on the endeavour of recognizing the other's communicative intention, and 'accommodate' eventual mistakes that are not worth deepening: "It is this "benevolent" or "charitable" attitude that allows the addressee to ignore mispronunciations, slips of the tongue, ambiguities, superficial inconsistencies, and other similar sources of misunderstanding, rather than letting them block the flow of communication at every step" (p. 297). Eventually, as Dascal observes, though there can be various forms of misunderstanding and incomprehension, "Yet, these obstacles notwithstanding, language use is still regarded as the most reliable means

¹⁷ Eveline T. Feteris, who has devoted a significant part of her research to the study of legal argumentation, observes that the judge's decision must be capable of being reasonably reconstructed and justified (Feteris 1999: 10): "Judges are obliged to justify their decision in order to give insight into the underlying considerations. This does not imply that they are obliged to give insight into the process of finding the right decision and in the (personal) motives which have played a role in this process. Research into the rationality of legal argumentation therefore concerns the requirements which relate to the arguments given in the context of justification and not requirements which relate to the decision process, the context of discovery. The decision process is a psychological process and, as such, the subject of another type of research. The study of legal argumentation is concerned with the standards which judges respect in justifying decisions, however reached".

¹⁸ In fact, as Dascal notices, "the endeavour to communicate, like any human endeavour of comparable complexity, can go wrong or amiss in a variety of ways" (p. 293).

we have to know what is going on in the minds of our fellow humans" (p. 497)¹⁹.

Conflicts

But there are cases where such a benevolent attitude is suspended, and then "the predominant *éthos* is confrontational rather than cooperative" (p. 298)²⁰. In these cases, communication is blocked, and the interaction becomes a conflict²¹; here, misunderstandings can be used as proper "weapons" to defy the other party²². In these cases, even the definition of what is at issue in the conversation becomes a matter of discussion, since it is directly bound to the assumption of the role of the protagonist and the antagonist in the dispute, and, thus, of the argumentative *burden of proof*²³. A particular case of problematic communication, which might also lead to conflicts, is the domain of intercultural communication, which Dascal tackles in Chapter XXI (*Understanding other cultures: the ecology of cultural space*, first published in 1991)²⁴.

¹⁹ See Chapter XXII (*Why should I ask her?*, first published in 1985) for a discussion of this issue.

²⁰ The analysis of conflicts turns out to be particularly relevant, since polemical discourse is pervasively present in our social life (see Dascal 1998 on this point).

²¹ On conflictual communication based on the principle of competition, see Rigotti, Rocci & Greco (2004:17), for an important distinction between competitions structured as 'races' and competitions structured as 'football matches': "The difference between a race and a match depends on the structure of the competition, which involves essential differences, mainly concerning the notion of *victory*. In the case of a football match, a team wins in that the other team loses; if a team scores three goals, they score three goals *against* the other team. The concept of a football match is that of the German term *Wettstreit* and Latin *pugna*. In a race (for instance, a time trial) a runner wins by achieving his own best result; the fact that other runners also get good results does not hinder his own achieving a good result. In this case, one could speak of *emulation* (German *Wetteifer*, Latin *certamen*) rather than of competition". The proper *conflict* evokes the situation of a football-match-structured competition.

²² In some cases, the conflict escalation can reach such a level that the interlocutors - or conflicting parties - cannot even communicate in order to find a solution. Conflict resolution practices, such as mediation, where a third neutral party intervenes with the aim of helping solve the conflict, are directed, at the first level, at re-establishing communication and reframing the interaction.

²³ On the notion of *burden of proof* see van Eemeren & Houtlosser (2003) and Walton (1988).

²⁴ An interesting proposal about the interpretation and possible settlement of intercultural conflicts has been made by S. Just (2004), who claims that "mutual understanding is attainable through dialogue" (ibid., p. 11). This is possible if parties seek mutual understanding "through demanding and providing *reasons* for opinions and practices" (ibid., p. 18)". Therefore, a suggestion for enhancing intercultural comprehension is the following: "All participants in the interaction should receive thorough instruction in the formal and procedural principles for demanding and giving reasons. That is, the participants should be trained in practical argumentation" (ibid., p. 19). In the same line of thought, Moulakis (2003: 38) states that, in intercultural contexts, "Concord is not

Controversies

A specific kind of conflict, to which Dascal devotes an insightful and comprehensive study, is that particular interaction defined as *controversy*²⁵. According to Dascal's definition, a controversy is a written, protracted quasi-dialogue constituted by elaborated pieces of discourse. Controversies certainly involve the presence of one or more inconsistencies between the statements of the two opponents (the *defendant* and the *opponent*); however, as Dascal highlights, this logical characterization does not exhaustively describe the nature of controversies, which are far more complex than simple differences of opinions between two interlocutors in a 'normal' conversation. Controversies are protracted conflicts²⁶, where the principle of charity between parties is blocked, and where what is normally left implicit in conversations must be negotiated: "Whereas in ordinary conversations the identification of conversational demands and the process of pragmatic interpretation run for the most part smoothly and tacitly, in controversies both are pervasively problematized and consequently raised to the level of explicit issues in dispute" (p. 282). Moreover, the question at issue (the '*controversy's demand*') cannot be solved only at a content level, since controversies involve an *existential dimension* and a *public dimension*, which must also be considered. The existential dimension concerns the opponents' reputation (their career, their intellectual and personal prestige), which is at stake in the dispute, and which generates an obligation to be critical and polemic with regard to the other's standpoint and person, in order not to loose one's face. The public dimension refers to the fact that the actual addressee of the opponents' argumentation is not the proper counterparty, but rather the 'public' that assists to the controversy, to which "the controversialist's dis-

achieved by sharing clear and distinct ideas but by the willingness to embark on common enterprises that arises out of an engagement that involves the personalities of the interlocutors". Moreover, as "They [cultures] are patterns of meaningful conduct, yet those meanings are largely implicit, present in the practice but only partially and indirectly articulated" (ibid, p. 34), intercultural dialogue allows to understand the reasons of the other's behaviour and beliefs, which are normally left implicit.

²⁵ On this point, see Chapter XIII, *Understanding controversies*, first published in 1989; in particular, see p. 280 for the definition of *controversy*. Moreover, for a discussion of the differences between *controversies*, *discussions* and *disputes* see Dascal (1998).

²⁶ The nature of controversies, which concern a difference of opinion both at an object-level and on several *meta-issues*, makes them particularly difficult to solve. It could also be argued that participants to a controversy are not really interested in solving their conflict, nor they normally accept the other's interpretation or the intervention of an impartial judge (see pp. 281-282).

course is implicitly addressed" (p. 289). The social legitimization of controversialists, in fact, does not depend on their opponents (who, by definition, cannot have a high opinion of them), but rather on the impression they manage to have on an external audience. As Dascal notices, the "audience-driven constraint" does not entail that every unsound or manipulative move is allowed in such a context, because the public of controversies is also committed to a standard of reasonableness ("The public praises Reason as well", p. 290)²⁷. In this sense, controversies can be defined "quasi-dialogues" because, although they must have a conversational appearance in order to be effective, their deep persuasive character is oriented to a third instance (the audience). The same structure is also present in television interviews and debates, public round-tables, courtroom interrogations, and, in some ways, in theatrical and literary dialogues.

5. Some final remarks

This book provides valuable insights on an impressively rich set of topics, also managing to link them in a unitary design. The themes examined in this review turn out to be particularly significant for Communication sciences: the notion of *communicative action*, with the specific application to collective actions, and the analysis of commitments and involvement as identifiers of the speakers' engagement within the communicative exchange; and, finally, the analysis of the interpretation of communicative intentions in non-trivial cases, where "the odds seem to be against communicative success" (p. x), which is developed through the whole book.

The analysis of indirectness and misunderstandings as possible sources of conflicts, and the deepening of controversies as a specific subtype of conflictual communication, seem to us particularly relevant for the analysis of polemic exchanges; this approach can be also considered a basis for further research on the features of conflict, which is also a necessary presupposition in order to tackle conflict resolution dialogues, such as problem-solving, negotiation, or even arbitration and mediation.

²⁷ Here, the value of the dialogic dimension of argumentation emerges since, even in conflictual situations, it implies a commitment to reasonableness. On this point, see Rigotti & Greco (2005), and van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004).

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