

Zeitschrift: Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research; Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences

Band: 6 (2006)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Comments on Carassa

Autor: Schubauer-Leoni, Maria Luisa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-791106>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

MARIA LUISA SCHUBAUER-LEONI*

COMMENTS ON CARASSA

The articulated programme proposed by Antonella Carassa brings into play various disciplinary fields, constitutive of communication sciences, with a specific attention laid upon the contribution of psychology as the science of the subject. The text looks for complementarities between approaches and more particularly between theoretical and epistemological standpoints, usually disjoint, in order to fertilize a renewed problematisation within the field of communication sciences. The project is ambitious and the debate which its realisation will arouse will advantageously promote, in a simultaneous manner, the essentially multidisciplinary field of communication sciences and that of psychological science. This discipline which evolves, as a matter of fact, as an autonomous science, can only come out reinforced (or fruitfully shaken!) from the immersion in epistemological, theoretical, methodological and praxeological questionings which characterise the scientific communities that study communicational practices.

Actional turn and triadic paradigm

In a perspective which I identify according to Vernant (1997) as an “actional turn”, Antonella Carassa forthwith assumes the ineluctable characteristic of the notion of *joint action* (as intended by Clark in 1996) by usefully revealing the pragmatic origins of the concept, in particular as intended by Grice. Seen as a collective action, a joint action is hence not only a juxtaposition of individual actions. It appeals to diverse cooperation modes between interlocutors and bears intersubjectivity processes capable of managing constitutive transactions of the agents (identitarian components, emotional and reflective consciousness dimensions) and

* Université de Genève, Maria-Luisa.Schubauer-Leoni@pse.unige.ch

of the worlds they co-elaborate too (intersubjective and intramundane as intended by Vernant, *op cit*). I hereby highlight an aspect also underlined in Antonella Carassa's contribution and which I consider central: the *ternarity* of the interactional model invoked. Even so, the paradigms dominant in psychology are traditionally binary models which represent, turn after turn, the user/artefact and the user/user interaction. Along these lines, to claim that relations between users are *mediated* by artefacts and that all relationship from a user to a (system of) artefact(s) is necessarily mediated by an individual or collective other entails a change of epistemological and departure paradigm, a substantial modification of the unit of analysis of interactional processes within human communication. This standpoint gives echo, partially at least, to that represented by the davidsonian triangle according to which one needs two rational agents handling a real-life experience to allow the objectivation of experience. To which one should add the intertwining of beliefs, prejudices, desires and social conventions to give body to the acting of each co-agent. The events, considered as "what agents manage to *make happen*" (*faire arriver*; in the terms of Ricoeur who discusses Davidson 1991) are nourished of historicity and phenomena emerging from interaction, and are thereafter to be understood as dynamic processes.

But one cannot stop at this point: can the epistemological stakes of a ternary model aiming at understanding and explaining the action of concrete individuals, submerged in interpersonal, interpersonal, group and institutional *games* (*jeux* in the terms of Sensevy 2007) avoid the consideration of the socio-historical constraints constituted by the corpus of cultural artefacts and of tools until then, which are the fruit of the practices of previous generations and which weigh on whatsoever interactional *hic et nunc*? A variety of works arising from the psychological field itself (Perret-Clermont et al. 2004) insist upon the semiotic components of interaction conceived in its triadic structure. Certain works (Moro & Rickenman 2004) namely revisit the decisive impact of pragmatist approaches (Dewey, Peirce but also Habermas) and take the position of the cultural historical Vygotskian paradigm and the problematic of *mediation* by insisting upon the roles of material objects as well as symbolic tools (language among them) and signs in triadic interaction.

To accurately describe what happens in the course of joint action presupposes, in a perspective which I defend as a result of these works, the identification of descriptive categories backed upon a conceptual system whose robustness is constantly to be verified in a dialectical relationship

with the observables. In default of theoretical categories, “natural” categories available in the culture of the agents and of the institutions - in and by which actions take form - will be erected into descriptors, legitimate and pertinent to the usage of the researcher, who will propose an *a-posteriori* reorganisation of these. This is one of the criticisms one can address to ethnomethodology, which, as it seems, does not attribute a satisfying statute to the questions of indexicality and of accountability which it mobilises. The discursive practices of agents *upon* their actions are on the contrary to be considered as emergents from *ad hoc* dialogical spaces: specific forms of intersubjectivity with researcher in interview contexts, or comprising other institutional agents in occasions for exchange upon practices that one should precise in order to define the function or the status.

The role of context likewise that of the impact of cultural pre-constructs upon undergoing joint action have an echo not only in a vygotskian approach, but also in a perspective of cognition and of situated/distributed action. Both currents, whose origins are distinct and to which Carassa's programme makes reference, contribute to challenge the solipsist positions of many cognitive approaches by posing the intrinsically social nature of cognition. From this, a vision of learning processes emerges which attributes an instituting function to the culture and the community of practices which give body to it.

If one admits, likewise Tomasello, that the capacity to read and share *intentions* with one's co-specifics is specifically human and is instrumented by the language with its correlate capacities of imitation, collaboration, simulation, etc., it results that joint actions are carried by *joint intentions* with regards to a shared goal. In order to attain a goal, co-agents recur to transactional processes and depending on the complexity of the objective, more or less sophisticated forms of action planning may be required. Notwithstanding, this does not mean that one can reduce action to its intentional and planning components.

Subsequently to the seminal works of Rizzolatti and collaborators, acknowledging the existence of neurons of a particular type (mirror neurons) at the basis of our social cognition to the point of founding certain so-said imitative, empathic and simulation, etc. behaviours, can lead to a new form of neurological reductionism of communication capacities. But one can also consider, in line with the previous positions, that the bio-behavioural equipment is inextricable from the activation conditions for actions to take place alongside the development of individuals. In a

perspective enlightening the transformation of subjects' relationships to the world and teaching, all study of joint action gains to articulate three types of mechanisms: i/ that inherent to role attribution and coordination in a given situation (*interpersonal* and *situational* level of analysis); ii/ mechanisms inherent to the reorganisation/transformation of institutional and cultural environments through and by means of which subjects meet and produce new artefacts (analysis level of the *socio-historical determinants and of the production of knowledge*) and iii/ mechanisms for the re-elaboration of meaning by users with regards to conducts which they jointly realise and which are accomplished in institutions carrying higher level intentions (*semiotic and institutional* level of analysis). The *communities of practices* which Carassa relates of with reference to Wenger are interesting with regards to this matter. But it is suitable not to reduce the analysis to the situational and conjectural *hic et nunc* to the detriment of an analysis of the socio-historical and institutional forms which constrain (and render possible) new practices and items of knowledge to occur in learning situations.

Antonella Carassa's article announces a project whose ambition and interest for communication sciences I have already underlined. In addition to the references already quoted in the text, specific forms of communication with educational and instructional purposes have also been studied by other research teams who are interested in action within professional and educational situations (Baudoin & Friedrich 2001; Bronckart et al. 2004) as well as in teaching and learning situations at school (Sensevy & Mercier 2007). In all cases, the multidisciplinary stakes are manifest. The trials for the articulation amongst approaches go alongside the proofing of the different interactional paradigms and, apparently, researchers who take this "actional turn" engage in projects whose outreach involves a reconfiguration of human/social sciences. I nonetheless identify, in this perspective, several obstacles: the risk not to give enough space to meaning – simultaneously personal and collective – which agents attribute to action (meaning inferred from ongoing action and meaning declared before and after action); the risk of a rationalist relationship to the practices (the agent being seen as proceeding to a strictly logical calculation of inferences); the risk of a sliding towards binary models which neglect the mediation process and the role of signs and conventions in communication. An entry by the mean of the sciences of the subject, beyond the risks of solipsism and monologic approaches which characterise it, tend to underestimate the importance

of a theory of situations and of the artefacts by which - and in relation to which - action is tied. In the same spirit, focalised upon the agent's or even the co-agent's intentions, the psychologists tend to forget the articulation between this level of intentionality and that of institutions under the aegis of which joint actions happen? Psychology may be more than merely a science of subjects.

References

- BAUDOIN, J.-M. & FRIEDRICH, J. (eds.). (2001). *Théories de l'action et éducation*, Bruxelles: De Boeck Université.
- BRONCKART, J.-P. et al. (2004). *Agir et discours en situation de travail*. Cahiers de la Section des sciences de l'éducation, Université de Genève: FAPSE 103.
- CLARK, H.H. (1996). *Using Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PERRET-CLERMONT, A.-N. et al. (eds.). (2004). *Joining society: Social interactions and learning in adolescence and youth*, New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MORO, C. & RICKENMANN, R. (eds.). (2004). *Situation éducative et significations*, Bruxelles: De Boeck.
- RICOEUR, P. (1991). *Événement et sens*. In: PETIT, J.-L. (ed.). *L'événement en perspective*. *Raisons Pratiques*, Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales: 41-56.
- SENSEVY, G. (2007). *Des catégories pour décrire et comprendre l'action du professeur*. In: SENSEVY, G. & MERCIER, A. (eds.). *Agir ensemble*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes: 13-49.
- VERNANT, D. (1997). *Du discours à l'action*, Paris: PUF.

