

Original Paper

Democracy, Polis and Parasite in Communication

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Abstract

Communication, as a social activity existing in and comprising almost any human action, cannot take place but as a mediated performance, given that it consists in the triadic relation between transmitter, message and receiver. Its goal is always the transmission of a message with the highest possible coherence and, at the same time, its simultaneous comprehension with the less possible deterioration of its original meaning. A basic assumption is that a potential difficulty in everyday communication is due for the most part to the existence of one or more parasites, which could be detected either in external factors or in the message itself. The question is whether a parasite could live in the signifier of a word and thus determine or alter its signified during an act of communication. This paper aims at exploring Serres' view on parasite and attempting to identify its existence and function within the signifier of words we use in everyday life. To that end the terms of "democracy" and "polis" will be used as examples of hosts of parasites.

Keywords

parasite, democracy, polis, signified of signifier

1. Assumptions

What we usually call successful communication in everyday life is mostly the transfer of thoughts and feelings of a transmitter on such a level of accuracy that a receiver can perceive, comprehend and possibly use correctly the signification of a message. Communication is regarded here not only as an exchange of sounds or written symbols, but also as the physical or virtual contact, cooperation or conflict among parts of the same system. System is a cluster of subjects or objects that executes at least one operation and tends to its reproduction. The level of accuracy depends on many factors such as the quantity and the quality of common experiences among the subjects of communication and the conditions of its space-time, which may vary from inner causes—e.g., emotions and biases—to

external circumstances—e.g., distance, known barriers and unpredictable obstacles.

Eco's interpretative approach of text discerns three types of intention during communication, which determine the process of attributing meanings in any kind of message (1992, pp. 29-32). All these intentions, i.e., author's, text's and reader's, could be called intrinsic and an eventual communication failure is thus to be considered inner. We can assume that, in that case, either an author could not express himself according to the instance of communication, or the means he employed were inappropriate, or, finally, a recipient could not participate in this act due to subjective conditions, such as lack of knowledge and ability, or objective conditions, such as indifference and prejudice of his behalf. At any rate, any other cause of communication failure whatsoever could be called external. A sudden noise, for instance, during an utterance could firstly not permit the integral transfer of the message and secondly disturb the attention of the recipient. This kind of intervention has nothing to do with the signification of the message per se or the aforementioned intentions. That is why we are allowed to call it a parasite.

Nevertheless, it is also feasible to recognize the existence of parasites inside the message and the act of utilizing meanings in the expressing of thoughts and feelings: a signified attached as a parasite to a signifier in a different space-time than that of the instance of communication may destroy in that very occasion the act of speech or even the proper use of the signifier in the long term. It is not difficult to understand how this happens; one could recall plenty of examples in everyday language and especially in political speech which demonstrate how a signified resulting from an ideology-oriented rhetoric act could transform the quality of a signifier. For example, the signified of "democratisation" within the context of international warfare nowadays may contain connotations of violence and imposition, although democracy remains so far a rather positive concept, being accepted as an optimal political regime or polity.

In spite of that, we should not forget that representative democracy is considered the best possible regime only during the last two or three centuries, namely in Modernity. In the Middle Ages democracy was just a way of governance with only historical value and few actual occasions, while in Plato's thought was a rather wrong regime or a step towards a decadent state. In the last two cases, "democratisation" could also mean a negative trajectory of a state, a movement towards chaos and ochlocracy, while in Modernity "democratisation" means the establishment of a regime where all citizens take part in the political life and decide for issues regarding their common life, although in an indirect way. The euphemism of "democratisation" used in foreign policies as the export of democratic values and good practices of governance from a civilisation (e.g., Western) to another (e.g., Islamic), for example according to Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* classification describing the post-Cold War world politics, would acquire a negative signification only during the last decades and under certain circumstances of intervention of a coalition of countries in the interior affairs of another one. We should mind the fact that all these signifieds of "democratisation" in Plato, in the Middle Ages and

now do not imply the same kind of negativity.

Another example of a parasitic attachment of a signified to a signifier which has an apparently neutral political and ideological value is the case of ancient Greek *polis*, which means city—but also state. Quentin Skinner (1989) observes that only after the end of the 16th century we can identify the notion of state as an autonomous entity which exercises political power through differentiated structures. Raymond Geuss (2001, pp. 48-49) seconds this opinion by asserting that Benjamin Jowett's translation of *polis* as “State” in Aristotle's *Politics* back in 1885 is simply false. Nevertheless, Aristotle clearly affirms in the first book of *Politics* that *polis* is a perfect society, self-sufficient and made for the well-being of humans (1252b27-29). In the third book, where he discusses the discrimination of regimes and comments the systematic structure of the political organisation of a *polis*, he points out that *politeia* and “Regime” (*Politeuma*) are synonyms and they are the supreme authority of *polis* (1279a25-27). *Polis* therefore is an integrated system of social and political relations and can be used as a synonym for “state”. Even though in Modern Greek “polis” means only city, the signification of political still remains intact, as it is impossible for us to imagine a city without political structures and institutions.

However, what is not self-evident is the further assumption that a parasite is not an a posteriori failure of the signifier but a part of it from the beginning of its emergence, a sine qua non ingredient of its organism, a part of its substance. In other words, the consensus, according to which things and concepts are named, contains also the rules of their misuse or abuse. If we accept this assumption, we are obliged to accept also that, in the first example, the term “democracy” contains—among others—the notions of violence and imposition in any context in which it may appear. One should observe that in Thucydides (2.65.9) is stated that “what was nominally a democracy became in his hands [Pericles'] government by the first citizen”. Hence, even in its original form, as direct democracy in ancient Athens, this regime is not deprived of the possibility to be abused and become a tyranny or an authoritarian state. Finally, a last assumption could be that a parasite is not only a fair part of the signifier—and of course of communication—but also it is the privileged signified and communication itself as a whole. This would mean that, in our example, the term “democracy” is identified with violence and imposition. Nonetheless, the question is not about the signified itself, but about the signified of the signifier in a less classical Saussurian stance.

The question raised here is whether the parasite is an indispensable part of all communication practices and at the same time an unavoidable foundation in the construction of meanings.

2. First Argument: Failure

Even though perhaps most people would recognize the role of the parasite in everyday communication as an external factor, the above mentioned assumptions could easily be considered absurd or at least exaggerated. The first attempt to prove the hypothesis that parasite is an ontic part of communication is

based on failure.

In *The Parasite*, the French philosopher Michel Serres (2009, p. 245) argues that the direct or mutual communication is a failure. He states that we are closed in ourselves; we transmit in vain gestures, signals and sounds ad infinitum. All these are nothing but noise; Leibniz is right, nobody listens to the others, nobody can understand anyone. The most astonishing thing is when there is a concert of voices, a communication, a harmony. Leibniz called this a miracle of God. It is obvious that Leibniz rather expresses his disappointment for the lack of authentic communication between human beings than depicts an actual reality. Nonetheless, it is not the case for Serres. Some chapters earlier (145) he penetrates the essence of communication in its wide sense: all systems are sums of messages and, if the recipient wants to listen to the sender and understand him, he/she must be united with the latter. However, the conjecture of this unification between the two is rather blurred. As for the communication, it exists because it does not function well.

Of course we could assert that all this construction is a mere metaphor: we all may agree that an absolute and perfect communication is merely utopic. There is always something missing, either in the intentions of the transmitter, or his/her words and actions, or in the translation and interpretation by the recipient. However, if we take a close look at Serres' phrase we will see that the dysfunction of communication, its failure, is not an obstacle that complicates communication but it is its agent, its cause. He does not say "*although* it does not function" but "*because* it does not function". A few pages later, he insists in this paradox and affirms that anything functions because it does not function well, while a system, in its literary sense, is falsely named that way, is something rare, it may not have ever existed; once the world was created, its transformation began (150).

Applying this aphorism to language, we could tackle the question of the transformation of signifieds: a signifier signifies a signified because—and not although—it fails to tell the truth about it, as Serres would claim. Aristotle in the *Categories* indicates that things are what we say about them. Serres seems to say quite the opposite: what we say about things is what they are not. The former founded his ontology upon language and the categories of being, while the latter builds his theory of being upon becoming. Serres acknowledges that being is not static; therefore, practically it is impossible to infer the permanent substance or the ontological truth about things, without taking in consideration their constant evolution. The same observation stands for language: communication based on standard signifieds is unattainable, because signifiers are domesticated hosts of parasites which forbid the repetition of same significations.

Exploring under this argument the example of "democracy", we could claim that its use, as a pretext or as an essential cause all nations must serve, in rather negative actions, such as an invasion, is due to the fact that "democracy" does not actually mean what a democratic society is but what it is not. In other words, the supposedly primordial signification of democracy is a regime where people freely and without external constraints decide for activities aiming at the well-being of the society as a whole and

through it of all its members, while, according to Serres, this definition would depict only what democracy does not. The definition is nothing more than an ideal situation, an initial identification of a signified with a signifier. However, if we accept Plato's and Thucydides' views on democracy, we would claim that democracy is a regime condemned to fail to achieve its primal end, which is the well-being of society. In that case, it is possible that negativity may be a constituent part of democracy and, when we talk about the essence of democracy in our time, we might have in mind that, without its so-called abuse, democracy would never exist. Thus, democracy cannot exist but as a failed regime, or democracy cannot help but fail, an assertion which is often used to describe other regimes such as fascism and communism, mere cases of "closed societies", according to Popper. Is thus democracy a closed society too, not because of its presumed failure, but due to its incapacity to tolerate other ideologies and mostly allow other forms of political and social formations within it?

As far as the example of *polis* is concerned, it is obvious that, since, according to Aristotle, it exists by nature (1252b33-34), it is so closely linked with the political that we cannot imagine a city without any kind of political structure and vice versa: we could hardly conceive as political any institutions without the existence of buildings, roads, parks, commercial shops etc. This connection does not imply that all kinds of political association are states; however, *polis*, as a signifier, contains the meaning of political and therefore could potentially lead to the creation of a state. Nonetheless, when we use the word "polis" today, we only understand, in the instance of its utterance, just a city.

In that sense, the parasite may have two functions, the second being a consequence of the first. The second is the first identification between a signifier and a signified, which at the same time embeds multiple possibilities of signification. The Heraclitean (Fragm. 91) "Ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers" finds here a perfect application: ever-newer signifieds are created by those who use the same signifiers. The ever-newer signifieds would prove the impossibility of communication, according to what Serres could claim thereupon. Consequently, there is communication because it is failed. If there were no failure in communication, it would not have existed. In other terms, the parasite existed before communication.

The first function of the parasite is the potentiality of a signifier to be identified with one or more signifieds, or rather the impossibility of the existence of a signifier without a signified. This principle, which leads inevitably to the above-mentioned second function of the parasite, originates from the temporal and ontological priority of the signified: it existed before the signifier. That is why the parasite existed before communication. Let us now come to a second argument based on ontology.

3. Second Argument: Ontology

Eco explains the steps of the birth of culture as follows: Australopithecus who utilises a stone as a tool has not yet passed the threshold of culture. When a thinking being, a certain homo, rationalises the function of the stone as a tool, when it names it and recognises it as a tool named stone, then he/she has

already entered the world of culture (1972, p. 26). Actually, he/she just accomplished an act of semiosis, he/she used some sounds as a signifier in order to recall the concept of the stone as something that can be used as a tool—signified—and refer to it as a tangible and visible entity—object. However, the existence of parasite is not a consequence of the multiplicity of objects that correspond to the same signified; there may be another parasite in the relation between signified and object, but this is an issue to be raised in another discussion. Aristotle in *Sophistical Refutations* (165a6-10) spoke about the impossibility to always display real objects during a conversation; the necessity of classification and use of words, which have a phonetic structure and a signification, is dictated by the nature of things itself. Firstly, not all objects are available in everyday discussions, hence we had to find the ability to refer somehow to absent entities, let alone abstract notions. Secondly, it is practically impossible to use different names for objects of the same sort: that is how the problem of the multiplicity of same objects is fixed. The real problem, nonetheless, resides in the multiplicity of signifieds.

It is evident that objects existed before signifieds and, as far as we could assume, mental images—or affections of the soul according to the Aristotelian terminology—existed before words. The association of a signified to a signifier is made through a mental procedure which had as goal to facilitate communication. As this action is not at all inert but dynamic, this identification is not always firm and commonly accepted under all circumstances, so the human intellect becomes the channel that introduces simultaneously the parasite as a third element of this relation, which actually from the first place was never dyadic, but triadic, as Serres would claim. The French philosopher talks about a parasite which invades as an assistance or obstacle into the relation of two things and becomes an included or enclosed third part. The parasite takes care of the relation so that no other parasite intrudes into that trilateral exchange (378). In terms of language, signifiers and signifieds, assistance it is because it renders possible the communication between human beings. Obstacle it is because no human being has the same mental image of a thing with another. It creates thus the parameters of communication and, at the same time, it abolishes it. Notwithstanding the everyday experience which proves that this system based on an endless and constantly renewed series of conventions is rather functional—that is why, after all, humans could create civilisation—, true communication, following Serres, is absent even at level zero of signification. Maybe in this very factor lies the incompetence of humans to establish a rigorously acceptable truth about things and concepts.

The parasite is what creates the surplus of meaning in comparison, for instance, with a simple denotation. The multiplicity of signifieds attached to a signifier, as a product of the parasite, namely of the included third part of their relation, has as a consequence that a signifier is always more abundant in meaning than a signified – or rather than one of its signifieds and the sum of them. As Agamben claims, a word has always more meaning than it can actually denote and there is always an insurmountable divergence between meaning and denotation (2005, p. 52). This is what we could call parasite in everyday communication. The Italian philosopher continues with the citation of Claude Lévi-Strauss'

theory on the prevalence of the signifier beside the signified, indicating an inequality between the two concepts, which can be solved only by a divine intellect and leads up to a surplus of the signifier towards the signifieds in which it resides (52).

It is obvious that the term “democracy” has more meaning than its signified, i.e., the regime where free citizens decide for the affairs of their state. The parasite in democracy has nothing to do with its extensive use in prospective metonyms such as “democracy in the decision-making of an organisation or a company” or in metaphorical phrases such as “democracy in the family” or “democracy in the classroom”. It is not about significations or possible meanings of the same notion. The argument of the parasite in “democracy” entails the question of how it is reasonable and conceivable to use it in order to refer to a somehow or even exact opposite—namely negative—value. Of course, it is quite rational for one to argue that its use in negative contexts is not but an ideological and political language game, a mere propaganda, intending to persuade a community of citizens for the good purpose of a bad action. However, the legitimation of this use resides in its definitely ambiguous origin and its latent polysemy. The role of the parasite as an ontological third part in the relation between signifier and signified is more clear-cut in the example of “polis”. Although “polis” means in Modern Greek nothing more than a city, the parasite is not involved in implications such as metaphors of this kind: “a city of ships”, but supposes the political as a structural principal of its existence. This is an apparent consequence of the fact that “polis” means more than an ensemble of houses, churches, schools, shops, governmental buildings etc.

Hence, the parasite is a part of the substance of everyday communication, for it is present in the association of signifieds with signifiers and is even prior to the signifier because it already appears in the representation of the world in the human spirit. If we were to create a semiotic triangle regarding the genealogy of signs, it would be difficult to eliminate the parasite from this relation. In that case, it could be placed at the centre of the triangle since it mediates all possible relations between all three angles. As Serres puts it (414), it interferes by instinct in mediations and conquers them all. It creates intrigues. It intercepts all flows and controls them. When we talk here about flows in a semiotic triangle, we mean images, concepts and ideas that move from the object to the signified and the signifier and vice versa as well as between signifier and signified. Metaphysical though it may seem, the concept of parasite could function as a methodological tool for a semiotics of signifier. We will conclude by mentioning how.

4. Conclusion: Parasitology

What we could understandably expect from a parasitology in semiotics, is the study of the signifier and more precisely the study of the signified of the signifier, which is to be distinguished noticeably from the signified itself. To that end we would evoke a last passage from Serres’ book. The philosopher creates a really impressive image in order to produce a logical inversion. We all consider, when

watching a ball game, that in the relation between a player and the ball, the player is normally the subject, the ruler, and the ball is the object. The truth is that a ball is really a ball when someone holds it in his/her hands. When it is left aside, it is a worthless and meaningless object. It loses its primordial semantic value. Let's go then to the game. The really good player is the one who can handle it skilfully. Serres argues that the ball is not there for the sake of the body but, on the contrary, the body is the object of the ball, it is like the earth and the sun, earth turns around it. The skilful player follows and serves the ball, instead of making it follow him and be useful to him. To play means to make ourselves predicate to ball's being. Ball is the subject of bodies, the subject of subjects. Laws are written for the ball, are defined according to it, and we obey them (452).

If we are keen on believing that signifiers exist just to serve signifieds, we should have on mind this metaphor of Serres'. Signifieds obey to the laws created for signifiers and are adjusted in daily communication to the life of the latter. In our first example, the signified of negative moral value, which the political term of the last decades "democratisation" is attached to, can survive only within a signifier of somewhat certainly positive moral value. When we hear that something is "democratic", we all expect to face something in accordance with our system of values. The signified of this something is not necessarily of that sort, but it plays inevitably with its rules. This is how rhetoric works. Nonetheless, the signifier of democracy has its secret life—in terms of common knowledge—which is defined by the parasite, namely the difference of views in the intellect of different humans—and democracy can easily afford a negative value. It is not only that some ancient Greek thinkers rejected it as a really unsuitable regime with regard to human prosperity, but even in our era democracy is not always considered as a synonym of rational and virtuous governance. Let us remember here Winston Churchill's quotes on democracy: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." and "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." Obviously, when something is worst, it is not good enough, or just good, while, when the average active citizen of a system is supposed to be incompetent for a five-minute conversation, then the regime is actually failed.

Even if we presume that in all these cases the signified is just using and abusing the signifier, we should still admit that it plays by the rules of it. It seems that it is the nature of the signifier that makes it susceptible to parasitic signifieds, controversial and many times contradictory. The signifier is thus more dangerous and susceptible to misconceptions in everyday communication than the signified. Let us use for the last time the example of "polis". The signified of "polis", which is an ordinary city, implies the common life of numerous human beings. Notwithstanding the fact that a city has already structures that determine social exchanges, still the signifier contains the concept of political and belongs to the same family of words with the signifiers "politics" and "police". As Agamben notes, citing von Justi's terms, politics (*Politik*) has a negative task to accomplish, the fighting of the state against all internal and external enemies, while the police (*Polizei*) has a positive one, to foster and take

care of the life of citizens (2005, p. 229). Thus, life—social life in a city, for instance—cannot be regarded without the political. The totalitarianism of our era though is based, as Agamben states clearly in his study of Nazism, Stalinism and democracy, on that identification between life and politics (231). This identification creates the biopolitical condition for the practice of sovereignty not only in absolutist regimes of the 20th century, but also in democracy. This is how the signifier “polis” functions and exceeds the standard signified. The fact that the signifier bears a wider spectrum of meanings, which few people are aware of, and maybe even less understand, is what it renders it dangerous.

What counts in many occasions is not what we say but how. This “how” is the signified of the signifier. As another philosopher of our times, Emile Cioran, points out in *La tentation d'exister*, in the Middle Ages, some intellectuals, tired of repeating the same issues and of using the same expressions and wanting to renovate their religious devoutness and at the same time emancipate the official terminology, turned to literary and attractive phrasing, which seemed quite unfamiliar. That was what Meister Eckhart did. He was such a literary stylist that he could express mainstream theological theories without sacrificing coherence and technique. He was considered and put on trial as heretic rather because of his style than because of his ideas (Cioran, 2007, p. 152). I would propose because of the signifieds of his signifiers.

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