

**From Understanding to Impact:  
Communicative Power  
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**KULTURWISSENSCHAFTLICHES  
INSTITUT ESSEN**

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**FORSCHUNGSKOLLEG DER  
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# Introduction

- The Communicative Constructivism is a continuation of social constructivism
- Language cannot be seen as the main factor for objectification and internalization, but it is communicative Acting
- communicative acting is not to be seen as an act of *informing the others*, but as an action, which tries to *achieve impact*
- The instrument to achieve this impact is *communicative power*. The concept of communicative power switches the aim of communicative acting from *understanding to impact*.

# Main Goal

- I want to bring forward an empirical based 'grounded' theory of every day communicating acting - which is in my perspective the basic form of each kind of communication, even the media communication.

# What matters?

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- Communicative acting can be powerful even if neither *violence* nor *domination* nor *charisma* is at the back of things.
- This kind of communicative power is frequently the norm and not an infrequent borderline case.
- ‘Normal’ communication in the everyday situation manages quite well without violence, domination, and charisma, but involves power nevertheless. It is precisely this power that is of interest to me.

# Function of communication

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1. Communication is not be about the transmission of messages on the one hand and understanding on the other hand;
2. Communication would instead be about effect, about impact – and that can only be achieved via power.
3. Power is what leads to actors to do that which is communicatively asked of them. This is one reason why it would make sense to switch the focus of communication theory away from ‘understanding’ to ‘impact’.

# What is impact?

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- Communicative acting is meant to give a reason to do something. If it didn't require a reason, then we would have a case of stimulus and response, a case of causality. Yet human action is not determinate by causality; rather, it requires reasons and motives.

# What is impact?

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- The first group of theories and concepts ascribes power to *language itself*, to the *forms of speaking*, or to the *forms of articulation* (Searle, Austin, Habermas).
- I will not be going into these approaches in this talk

# What is impact?

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- The second group sees power in the communicating *actor* or to be more precise, in the *social situation* that the persons communicating jointly construct.
- One of these theories focuses on the authorized speaker (Bourdieu 2005) and another on the concept of charisma (Weber 1972). I will not be going into these approaches in this talk either

# Relevance and Reliability

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- Actors gain relevance for one another if they are reliable (Brandom 1994: 206ff).
- A reliable co-actor in a communication process is the one whose communicative acting has the (mostly) implicitly stated reasons and consequences.
- The power of communicative acting is predicated on the creation of reliability

# Communicative acting makes identity

- Communicative acting always creates the identity of the persons communicating with one another
- Firstly in a structural way, which means that all those who participate in the communication process are generally understood to be the owners of identity.
- Secondly the communication process always ascribes a particular identity to the counterpart and to the communicating person as well.

# Communicative acting makes identity

- Communication therefore does not just say that we are a person but also which person we are. Communication allocates us in our field of interaction.
- It is from this fundamental task of communication that the power of communication grows. For just as communication can ascribe a specific identity, so too can it deny that identity or re-interpret it and bring an entirely new identity to the light of day.

# Path Dependence

- With each act of communication, the persons involved contribute to the writing of a future open-ended history that will never be really deleted.
- No communication process starts at point zero; each one picks up from the preceding one, continues it, modifies it or transforms it, even if the persons so involved have previously never communicated with one another.

# Relationship is the basis of communicative power

- The Communicative Power arises from the special relationship which the persons communicating enter into with one other, create with one another.
- If the participants succeed in becoming important for one another, then this will be a special social relationship.
- The communicative power leads on from the relationship of the actors to one another and for the significance of the other for the own definition of identity. This power is ultimately based on recognition, on voluntariness.

# Communicative power is power over identity

- Communicative acting creates identity and because identity is never really fixed, communication can define identity anew, damage it or – in the worst case – destroy it. "This vulnerability cannot simply be wished away" (Butler).

# Communicative Death

- One who is rated as unreliable, with whom one talks increasingly less or with whom one does not even talk
- What he says becomes meaningless and then he himself: he becomes excluded, marginalized.
- He may have words but his words lack the power to move others and provide others with a motive for their actions – he dies a communicative death.
- What he says does not induce anything anymore.

# The social significance of communicative power

- What is decisive for the power of communication are the relationship and the ensuing significance of the person communicating for the identity negotiation by the counterpart.
- If this significance is high enough, then the power of communication is stronger than domination and violence.
- Communicative Power can motivate others to skyjack planes or confess to crimes. Communicative power is able to inspire someone a whole life long or to bind him to his past a whole life long.

# Danke für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!

Thank you for Listening



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