

The Power of Communication: Looks, Words, and Gestures Make Society

By
Hermann Strasser

Abstract

Social order comes about only through mankind's cultural control of animal inclinations. This statement can be seen particularly clearly on the action level: Humans communicate with others through looks, words, and gestures. In this way, via rules, values, and symbols, they create a social bond with other humans. Action is fundamental to the architecture of society because humans cannot *not* communicate. Therefore, humans turn out to be not only communicators but also relational guides, making them ingenious architects of society.

Keywords: culture, action, communication, symbols, gestures, impression management

Introduction

Is there any better proof of the communicator as the architect of society than the Coronavirus era? Just think of the pronouncements of virologists, health ministers in various countries, governors, mayors, and lateral thinkers. Think also about the lost contacts and frustration of many citizens. Communication has always been a societal feature of systemic relevance. But who thinks about the different ways humans communicate when life is "normal?" Our everyday professional and family lives are characterized by people's actions in which they use looks, words, and gestures to communicate messages and make impressions.



Hermann Strasser

No Society without Communication

Human life is the space where communication takes place, no matter our situation. As Paul Watzlawick (2015) suggested, human beings cannot *not* communicate. When actors with whom we interact regularly suddenly disappear from this space, new greeting rituals must be introduced. People wear masks and words change. As

creatures of habit, humans feel challenged, distressed or even threatened. For many people, the era of Covid-19 leads to being alone. Some associate aloneness with a feeling of loneliness. Others speak of social isolation. Psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer (2018) views loneliness not only as a feeling but also as a contagious disease. However one views it, aloneness harms individuals, their contacts, and the entire community.

Here I would like to discuss briefly my latest book, *The Communicator as the Architect of Society: Looks, Words, and Gestures* (Strasser 2020).¹ The main focus of my book is on tracing the roots and consequences of human rule-governed action. To this end, I imagine society as a pyramid which contains four levels from bottom to top. The levels of the pyramid reflect the conditions of life whose threads come together to form a structure (cf. Reimann et al. 1991).

At the bottom of the pyramid is the first and basic level: *action*. *Relationships* are on the next level. *Institutions* form the third level and *complex subsystems of society*, the fourth level. On top, like a roof, is *social structure*. In social situations, we not only engage in actions, but also form relationships with other people. To engage in

¹My book appeared recently as the first volume in the new series *Edition soziologie heute* in German. This series is part of the activities of the journal *soziologie heute* (sociology today) which is published in Linz, Austria.

social relationships, however, humans need to create and use rules of conduct that are binding in various social contexts. The family, school, church, judiciary, political parties, and the media provide us with the institutional contexts of the social pyramid. Humans also must deal with complex subsystems of society. These include, for example, municipalities in federal states, organizations, associations, and clubs.

The Power of Communication

Through these four levels we can view an extremely complex social system: the structure of society in which we live and act. The social structure defines the interrelationships of actions that come from the various institutional moorings of people. Social structure also provides people with achieved and ascribed membership in social groups or social categories based on religion, education, occupation, income, race, gender, and age.

What constitutes humans as acting, understanding individuals that makes them architects of society? The answer to this question is found in how humans communicate with each other through looks, words, and gestures and what kinds of consequences follow.

Thus, the reader sets out to explore how humans harness culture and emerge as relational guides, ultimately elevating them to the ingenious architects and builders of society. In the chapters where I discuss looks, words, and gestures, I deal in more detail with how humans not only create society, but also make it. Each of all five chapters ends with a summary of insights. However, the central insight I want to share is that humans create and make society justified in light of the forces that lurk within them and their social construct. Therefore, in the final chapter, I take a critical look at the safeguarding and endangering aspects of the social bond between humans.

I hope that this alphabet soup, which was created in the Coronavirus period, will be palatable to readers. Next, I look at the main features of the communicator and the central theses of my book.

Mankind, Janus-Faced Beings

That humans are Janus-faced beings is beyond question. Humans belong to two worlds: nature and culture. Social behavior, which is oriented towards other people, can only be understood from human tribal history. Due to their unspecific organic equipment, human beings cannot live without culture, which defines their way of life. This observation can also be

demonstrated by the wolf children and Kaspar Hauser, the "enigmatic boulder." Humans do not define the limits of their living world by scent but, instead, by visible symbols which are based on moral values and rules of behavior. If this cultural frame of reference did not exist, human society would not function. This is the argument at the center of my first chapter.

After exiting from mother's womb, the human beings must find their way in this world slowly. The newborn leaves a closed world and enters an open world. While the animal is largely bound to its environment, humans must create their own world. The animal in us can only be tamed and controlled by cultural commands and prohibitions that we internalize as moral obligations. Socialization and social control turn us into human beings and our lives into schools. Life is action, in that humans communicate through looks as facial expressions, words as language, gestures as body language. These tools also make clever adaptors.

Visual Creatures

In the next chapters of my book, I discuss the "school of human life," which is brought to us through looks, words, and gestures. Thus, as visual animals, acting human beings experience that they come via ways of seeing to points of view. The process of seeing changes the world we perceive *and* the world that is perceived by other people. The world is, as we see it. However, the visible world is always changing. Many years ago, images that we saw on television, in videos, photos and films have become the actual media of our perception and have replaced seeing directly, as German film director Edgar Reitz (2019) argues.

In order to consider something to be true, we must understand what we perceive. The eye "thinks," although "perceiving" is not the same as "taking something for true." The gaze symbolizes presence. The presence of other people has always changed our behavior.

Language, the Creator

How does what we perceive to be true come about? As the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (2000) made clear, we humans reveal reality by means of language. So the eye eats too, and there is love at first sight. For to be human is to act, to use language and to be used by it, as Erving Goffman (1959) taught us in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Because the path of civilization is paved by words, language moves. With words, humans could give

meaning to things beyond their immediate experience. Language enabled us to talk about experiences not immediately present to us (cf. Strasser/Bilitza 2011). With language we set off on the way through life. We communicate verbally and non-verbally, give things a name, and interpret them. Languages also change when new content and forms of thought enter a language – for example, the use of abbreviations such as LOL not only by young people. During the time of the Corona pandemic, our minds have been literally infected with new words including home office,² lockdown, lateral thinkers, FFP2 masks, shock ventilation, at-risk groups, triage, and incidence.

As social media demonstrate, linguistic reduction leads to emotionalized expression. The choice of words in e-mails, text messages, and letters also points to the increasing emotionalization in society. For example, people often write to each other as if their relationship had changed, although they have not become closer. We must ask ourselves whether we still experience the world through our five senses or only via photos and videos that we are supposed to interpret. This comment applies to the increasing number of video conferences in which people are involved, not only from their home offices but also when direct, face-to-face communication is not possible. Communication experts such as Joachim Höflich even speak of a "new form of sociality:" "We have never communicated as much as we do today and never talked to each other as little" (Fromme 2018).

Images, ideas of the world, are activated in the human brain through language. For writers like Friedrich Dürrenmatt, writing is "coming to terms with the world through language." The limits of communication are the limits of society. It is not surprising that, for Niklas Luhmann, society simply meant communication (Luhmann 1996; Schäfers 2016). Wilhelm von Humboldt had already stated: "The true home is actually language." Language is not only communication but also makes cognition possible, that is, views of the world, not just worldviews.

The Impression Manager

Keep in mind that about 90% of our linguistic utterances are accompanied by gestures, especially the movement of the head, arms and hands. After all, we all

²Since the advent of Covid-19, the term "home office" is used in Germany and in many other non-English speaking countries unlike the American expression, "working from home."

speak body language as well as use words. My take-away point is that nothing works in the absence of nonverbal communication, even when communication is usually expressed through speech.

For gesture researcher David McNeill (2015), gesture thus becomes the "window of the mind." Gestures make a message understandable and clarify what is important to the speaker. For example, Donald Trump used two gestures to illustrate a point: the index finger jab and the fist swing.

Gestures change and reflect changes in society. The Corona mask and the standoff are also gestures, as gestures are expressed in rituals, customs, and mores in general. The mime Samy Molcho (1983: 9, 21) said in a nutshell: The body is "the glove of the soul," "the expression of inner movements." Facial expression, gestures, speech and voice enter into an alliance of expression that leaves an impression. Humans are constantly challenged to save face.

CONCLUSION

Humans: From the Sapient of Relationships to the Architect of Society

Mankind's greatest challenge is probably to order life through meaning, but at the same time to view life as open to change. To do this, we build cultural safety valves into the flow of our daily lives in order to let off steam while finding new, surprising solutions to problems. Because the social bond created by culture is not inherent to us, we find it difficult to bear the burden of social control without temporary relief. In other words, without taming the beast within and through creative culture, man cannot *become* man and cannot *be* man (cf. Stark, 1976, 1978).

Looks, words, and gestures become the mirror of meaning in our way of life, our culture. Through the mirror reflection of culture, we understand what it means to be human. Looks, words, and gestures practiced regularly make us what we are: communicators. A society's culture provides the building material and the framework for social architecture and makes humans architects of society, not just sociological mind-game players.

The idea of society as a pyramid also makes it clear that humans, as communicators, do not just design society. Beginning on the ground floor, we build society through our actions. Regarding these ways of communication, as I explained in the second and third chapters of my book, our ways of seeing become points

of view via gazes and words. Only through language can we give reality a communicative face.

With the appearance and impressions humans create, they become not only the builder of society but also the ingenious architect of the building. However, "ingenious" does not always mean "ideal." We are supported in this task by our ability to communicate cooperatively, through which we create the "we" with the other. The other is our "looking-glass self," as classic sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1902) defined this term. We hold up the mirror of other people's impressions. These impressions of us shape the way we recognize and define ourselves. Since symbiosis has been the most important driving force of evolution, our mode of existence is, and remains, communication.

We live and learn from our modes of relation, making us a sapient of relationship. As such, we search for meaning and create meaning by establishing relationships with other people. In sum, our actions are directed towards gaining the appreciation of others important to us and avoiding their disregard. Through appreciation, reason and feelings are combined and enlighten us about what is socially desirable in our society. As Kister (2020) wrote: "It is the others who make us human." For this reason, my book is dedicated to the other, our looking-glass self.

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