Mood and Meaning: A Heideggerian Critique of Foucauldian Discourse in Communication Theory

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Abstract

This paper offers a Heideggerian critique of Foucauldian discourse. The study has been limited to the realm of communication, and it is argued that a fundamental reorientation of communication is possible with Heideggerian phenomenology, particularly with the idea of 'Mood'. Michel Foucault's discourse theory situates communication within historically contingent structures. These structures are founded on the power-knowledge nexus. In contrast, Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology foregrounds mood (Stimmung) as the ontological precondition for meaningful communication. Emphasizing mood as a form of pre-reflective, affective attunement that discloses the world, the theorization of human communication will be much more productive and deeper. Accordingly, this study posits communication within the lived, embodied, and temporally situated structure of Dasein. This approach is contrasted with Foucault's structuralist account, which positions the subject as a product of discursive formations. For Foucault, meaning is regulated by institutionalized systems of power in contrast to the Heideggerian idea of pre-reflective, affective attunement that discloses the world. This paper juxtaposes the two paradigms to argue that Heidegger's mood-centered model of communication provides a more authentic

and existential foundation for understanding the 'communicative act' as a mode of being-in-the-world. By transcending discursive determinism, this study informs the necessity of integrating existential care into communication theory.

Keywords: *Heidegger, mood, existential phenomenology, communication theory, Foucault, discourse*

Introduction

This paper is based on contrasting conceptions of communication found in conceptualizations in Heidegger's existential phenomenology and Foucault's discourse theory. It investigates how Heidegger's notion of mood as a foundational mode of human existence is crucial in understanding communication as a moment of disclosing the world. The Heideggerian idea is fundamentally focused on the meaning that precedes language and rational thought, unlike traditional cognitive or discursive models of communication. Heidegger sees mood as a pre-reflective attunement to the world. Therefore, communication is always embodied, situated, and intimately tied to the temporality of human experience.

The paper critically compares Heidegger's thought with Foucault's view of communication, noting that the external forces of the power-knowledge nexus profoundly shape both. That nexus is embedded in historical, institutional, and discursive contexts and lacks an individual's authentic, affective engagement with the world.

Accordingly, the paper argues that the communication act should be theorized not only structurally as a social construct shaped by discourse, but as a lived experience, guided by mood and attunement.

Mood as Pre-Reflective Attunement and Intentionality

Heidegger's existential phenomenology has profound implications for communication, but the same discipline has

not been investigated in depth by communication scholars. Heideggerian philosophy radicalized Western thought and its ontology project. However, that turn was not adequately grasped by the communication theorists.

In this paper, the cardinal idea of Heidegger's existential phenomenology, Mood, has been given pride of place, as it plays a foundational role in shaping communication by disclosing the world as meaningful. This disclosure comes even before rational thought or language begins. For Heidegger, Mood is not a private emotion but a mode of being-in-the-world (Colombetti, 2017). This pre-reflective attunement arises based on intentionality. For Heidegger, mood is an ontic expression of Befindlichkeit, or disposedness (Heidegger, 1996). This is the most profound thing in communication, as it establishes the background of significance for communicators, within which understanding can take place:

> In fact, Heidegger holds that our capacity to have moods is constitutive of human existence. We are who we are, according to Heidegger, not only because we are rational, social, or practical beings, but also because we are affective, and specifically, mooded beings: that is, beings who experience moods. On Heidegger's account, it is because we are mooded that the world is disclosed to us and that we find ourselves amidst worldly projects and social situations that already matter to us and that emotionally affect us. (Ratcliffe & Szanto, 2015, p. 662)

According to Heideggerian philosophy, we do not approach language or interaction neutrally; we are always already in a mood. This mood opens up the world for us, and others are crucial in creating the world. The other may be threatening or welcoming. Accordingly, Heideggerian understanding of communication is not based on closed or structured systems, but on affective openness to the world. Someone's existence is embodied, immediate, and temporally situated.

In this study, a comparative analysis is conducted

using Foucauldian discourse analysis and its communicative implications, in contrast to Heidegger. Michel Foucault's theory of discourse offers a structural, historical, and institutional account of communication, in contrast to Heidegger, and the structural tradition of Western thought is manifest in his work. For Foucault, communication is shaped not by individual mood or existential attunement, but by discursive formations (Smart, 1994). These discursive formations regulate what can be said, who can speak, and what is regarded as truth. Therefore, discourse is a system of power-knowledge nexus that governs meaning through rules, classifications, and institutional practices.

> The alternative notion of power advanced by Foucault marks a radical departure from the conventional "power as domination" perception, in that it does not ascribe power to any particular actor. Foucault considers power to be omnipresent and to permeate society, affecting everyone. According to Foucault, power is intrinsically related to "knowledge." What is regarded as "knowledge" upholds certain social norms and standards, which are assimilated into the way individuals see themselves and relate to others. Foucault terms this indirect, insidious form of social control "disciplinary" power. (Masaki, 2007, p. 19)

Communication in a discourse operates through structures external to the individual. Such discourses can construct subjects through their discursive frameworks. In a Foucauldian analysis, communication is less a matter of affective engagement with the world than an expression of historically situated regimes of knowledge. Heidegger sees mood as disclosing a pre-linguistic horizon of meaning; Foucault sees discourse as constructing meaning through language, power, and institutional norms. Heidegger's communication model is existential and phenomenological, beginning in the lived world. The felt immediacy of being is emphasized. Communicative insights in a Foucauldian approach have to be realized archaeologically and genealogically. Subjectivity is the result of discourse, and systems of meaning are not affected by individual subjects.

The Transcendence of Structural Conditions in Communication Theory

Communication in a Heideggerian framework is personal, situated openness. The mood is culturally shaped and grounded in the ontological structure of human existence (Dasein). Foucault, by contrast, denies any fixed or universal structure of the self. Hence, communication is not an agent's matter, but rather a phenomenon that discursive practices have produced. The mood enables authenticity or care-driven openness in contrast to Foucauldian skepticism on being "authentic"; that may itself be an effect of normalization or surveillance.

The mood-centered theory of communication transcends structural conditions, power, and historical contingency. The idea of theorizing how communication emerges from embodied care and moodedness has long been missing in the Western tradition, and Foucauldian understanding is a prime example of how communication is shaped by external systems of control and meaning, which is unique to the Western thought system. Each offers a profound—but profoundly different—insight into how human beings understand and relate to each other through language.

Heidegger defines understanding as "projection onto possibilities," and meaning is created through the ability to grasp things in terms of their potential ways of being or uses.

> Dasein's being as Sorge is factical existence. The understanding projection onto possibilities of being essentially determines it. What these possibilities factically are, Heidegger insists, is not for the ontological-existential analysis to determine. Nevertheless, insofar as Dasein is geworfen into them, their horizon is determined in advance. The horizon that determines what counts as an existential possibility for Dasein is given over to it as a legacy [Erbe] from worlds of the past. In the mode of authenticity: Die Entschlossenheit, in der das Dasein auf sich selbst zurückkommt, erschließt die jeweiligen

> faktischen Möglichkeiten eigentlichen Existierens aus dem Erbe, das sie als Geworfene übernimmt. The determination of possibilities by the legacy given over to Dasein is the essential historicity of Dasein's factical existentiality, the essential historicity of Dasein's being as Sorge. Insofar as temporality is the ecstatic unity of the Sorge-structure, this historicity- that is, the possibility of history as such-is grounded in the temporality of Dasein. (Duits, 2009, p. 85)

This understanding is not cognitive but existential. It arises from being-in-the-world in a practical and situated manner. For example, understanding how to play chess is not simply knowing the rules, but being attuned to the strategic affordances of different moves. Therefore, learning a language or communicating with communicative partners is not cognitive, but existential. This attunement is being "at home in a world" in the Heideggerian terminology (Malpas, 2008). In a communication activity, when one responds skillfully and immediately to situations based on familiarity and involvement, it will be an existential response. Understanding, in this sense, is profoundly pragmatic, and it involves responding to the world based on a background sense of what matters and what is possible.

The Role of the Subject in Communication

Interpretation, for Heidegger, is the enactment or working out of the possibilities projected in understanding and it consists of choices among the field of meaningful possibilities (Hill, 2022). In such possibilities, the understanding discloses itself. In such a circumstance, communication is an articulation entangled with habitual and embodied coping. This coping is not grounded in reflective thought. Accordingly, in a communicative practice, meaning arises through lived engagement centred in the ontological structure of Dasein. In such an endeavour, existential care and attunement to the world are the key. In stark contrast, Foucault's structuralist approach holds that meaning is

constituted by historically contingent systems of discourse, in which networks of language, practices, institutions, and norms play a pivotal role (Kelly, 2010). This structural framework is the limit on what can be said, thought, and known. Then, the subject is not capable of exercising its agency and interpreting or projecting meaning freely. For Foucault, the subject is produced by discourse in a given historical context.

> Foucault thinks that this standard structure is more readily discernible through analysis of the cognitive consciousness. What is seen only in partial glimpses in a study of the evaluative domain appears full-blown in a study of the cognitive. Accordingly, Foucault expects that in disengaging the Classical Age's positive knowledge of madness, he will also reveal explicitly the "common experience" of madness that underlies both domains. "This unique experience, which resides both here and there, which supports and justifies the practice of confinement and the cycle of knowledge - it is this that constitutes the classical experience of madness". (Gutting, 1989, p. 79)

What appears as understanding or interpretation comes from the external world and is governed by discursive rules and power structures. These structural arrangements are, in a sense, predefined and demarcate what is intelligible. Hence, Foucault misses the agent's situated, embodied, and affective projection of meaning. He sees communication and subjectivity as shaped externally by systems of knowledge and power, and is less interested in the existential structures of care and openness. Theorizing mood in communicative activity transcends the constraints of structures that regulate the production of meaning and the formation of subjects as an existential enactment of freedom.

Foregrounding agency in communication is a salient feature in Heidegger's phenomenology as it relies on lived experience and the ontological horizon of possibility. In contrast, Foucault's archaeology and genealogy foreground structure and history. To

understand human communication more deeply, the Heideggerian mood plays a profound role in interpretation, emerging from being-in-the-world; the subject's sense of possibility is entirely open. Not only Foucauldian discourse but also Heideggerian understanding is historically shaped. However, the two perspectives diverge fundamentally; Heidegger emphasizes the existential projection of meaning from within, and Foucault's concern is the external and historical forces that construct and regulate meaning. Hence, the two philosophical standpoints on communication contrast with each other as one begins from lived attunement, the other from structured constraint.

Heidegger's Philosophy of Discourse

Heidegger also engages in a philosophical project on discourse (Rede) like Foucault, but its fundamental aspect is to understand the positioning of the human being in lived experience (Honneth, 1992). For Heidegger, the discourse is the way in which the intelligibility of the world is articulated through signification. Hence, it is a pre-linguistic, pragmatic phenomenon that shapes active engagement with the world. Through discourse, we can identify the significant features of communicative surroundings, interpret them, and respond skillfully. This allows human beings to recognize what matters to us in any given situation. It is grounded in our practical involvement with the world. Discourse, for Heidegger, is not just verbal or linguistic communication. It is but a broader and more fundamental mode of meaning-making. It includes the way we orient ourselves to objects and situations, even when language is not involved.

However, Heidegger had paid serious attention to idle talk (Gerede), as it leads people to no longer engage with the world in a way that makes its richness and complexity intelligible (McCormick, 2020). In such talk, people rely on shallow, general statements that anyone can understand without severe involvement. This type of communication is categorized as detached from the world; a mere exchange of words without

genuine understanding or orientation. Therefore, for Heidegger, the genuine form of communication is marked by embodiment in lived experience. The idle talk flattens experience into a more generic, surface-level exchange. Michel Foucault's theory of discourse operates within a completely different structuralist and historical framework (Howarth, 2000). As Foucault understands, discourse is not simply a way of articulating the intelligibility of the world. For him, discourse is a system of power-knowledge. Hence, it is not an existential engagement with the world. Instead, it is the very mechanism through which subjectivity, knowledge, and reality are constituted. This regulatory structure is instrumental in organizing and limiting what is possible to say or think.

The Heideggerian idea of the call of conscience is a form of deeply personal, non-linguistic communication. It orients us toward a more authentic mode of existence.

> In order to disclose Dasein's ownmost, finite possibility of being, Dasein's everyday involvement with beings needs to be interrupted. This occurs through the call of conscience, a call that occurs without sound. "The call of conscience," says Heidegger, "has the character of summoning Da-sein to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self, by summoning it to its ownmost quality of being a lack". Of course, here Heidegger is considering the call of conscience as an ontological term rather than as a psychological phenomenon. He emphasizes the disclosive function of conscience: "Conscience gives us 'something' to understand, it discloses". "What" consciousness discloses is Dasein's finitude (its being a "lack") and, with it, Dasein's ownmost possibility of being. (Vallega-Neu, 2003, p.15)

Foucault, on the other hand, would argue that the very way we understand conscience, selfhood, or subjectivity is formed and constrained by historical discursive structures. Therefore, the truths are determined by the structures. Power

dynamics operate within these structures, and the boundaries of discourse are the limits of power dynamics. The individuals are often unaware of how deeply these external, discursive forces govern their thinking and speaking. Heidegger's emphasis on ontological questions of existence and meaning-making widens the horizons of communication, in contrast to Foucault's focus on epistemological and political concerns. Accordingly, for Foucault, a communicative act is a place where social control and normalization occur. However, for Heidegger, communication is a fundamental, pragmatic mode of signification, and it orients us to the world. The individual's engagement with the world and existential authenticity opens up a new vista for communicative practices, in contrast to the Foucauldian explanation of historical, social, and political primacy in communication, the governance of knowledge, and subjectivity.

Inauthenticity and Authenticity in Communication

Inauthenticity, in which individuals conform to social norms and allow their lives to be dictated by external expectations, constrains the communication phenomenon. Authenticity, therefore, is a communicative act that involves a genuine engagement with one's situation. In such authenticity, individuals consciously choose how they will respond to the world. Their inner sense of what truly matters to them, rather than reacting passively to social pressures, is manifested. In comparing Heidegger's views on communication and temporality with Michel Foucault's approach, it is possible to identify key differences in how both philosophers understand the roles of time and communication. Authentic communication, in a Heideggerian explanation, emerges from a self that is temporally situated. The self constantly retains the past, awaits the future, and engages with the present. This temporal structure enables people to make sense of their world and communicate meaningfully. Heidegger argues that human beings are always already situated within a horizon of temporal expectations (Heidegger, 1996). While Heidegger

highlights the temporal structure of human existence, Foucault emphasizes historically contingent discursive formations.

> Whenever one can describe, between several statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions, and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formation. (Foucault, 1972, p. 38)

For Foucault, communication is an inextricable part of the knowledge-power nexus. Therefore, discursive formations imply that dominant discourses largely determine our understanding of time, history, and self. History informs what we communicate, what we can understand, and what we can express. Foucault's concept of historization marks a stark difference from Heidegger's view of temporalization. The significance of time in communication —Heidegger's idea that time is not simply a flow of now-moments but also a structure of meaning —contrasts with Foucault's focus on historical time.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the philosophical divergence between Heidegger and Foucault regarding communication, not merely as an examination of two unique philosophers, but also to understand the difference between two giants through the systems of the Western world. The study revealed two fundamentally distinct conceptions of communication that shed intense light on the reconceptualization of the communication 'act'. Heidegger's mood-centered model is centred on the phenomenon of communication as an existential, embodied, and temporally situated mode of being-in-the-world. Western communication scholars had not seriously studied this particular mode of thinking on communication, and by revealing the metaphysics of presence in Western thought, Heidegger radicalized the entire history of Western thought. This paper sought to grasp Heidegger's

revolutionary idea of communication and to theorize it through a comparative analysis. For Heidegger, Mood, as an ontological attunement, discloses a horizon of meaning prior to language or cognitive articulation. It allows individuals to engage authentically with the world and the Other. In contrast, Foucault's discourse theory counts communication as a historically contingent construct. Systems of power govern this construct. This system of power is highly diffused and interlinked with knowledge. The communicative subject is produced and regulated accordingly. Heidegger emphasizes openness, authenticity, and existential care for communication, revealing a different paradigm. In this paper, Foucault's focus on structure, constraint, and normalization was questioned through a phenomenological lens. Accordingly, this study asserts that communication theory must transcend the confines of discursive determinism to recognize the foundational role of affective, pre-reflective attunement in meaning-making. By mooting Heidegger's insights alongside Foucauldian critique, it was able to uncover a richer, more holistic understanding of communication. This theorization in communication embraces the lived immediacy of being.

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