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## Phrases in Time... \*

*I had always assumed that cliché was a suburb in Paris, until I discovered it was a street in Oxford.*

(Philip Guedalla)

**Abstract:** The text deals with clichés, in the sense of phrases everybody uses just because they are in fashion. The difference between phrase and enunciation, between text and discourse is the foundation of the claim made in this study. A phrase – any phrase – can have a semantic of its own and this makes it worth using in some contexts. In other words, the phrases get meanings in context. But the changing of contexts could make a perfectly acceptable phrase become not so acceptable. Or, contexts evolve and resuming former truths can have the most unexpected results. Some notorious phrases are discussed and proven out of date or simply inadequate. On the other hand, a well known phrase is saluted as happily enriched with a meaning which got lost over the years. When it comes to using phrases, we have discourses, and the meaning of any discourse is contextual. Clichés don’t work well all the time.

**Keywords:** context sensitive meaning, phrase vs. enunciation, text vs. discourse, clichés

### 1. The problem with clichés

They have a great power of seduction, they conquer people by crowds, they stick on our minds, once they came they stay. Sometimes, using clichés is a mark of belonging, sometimes, it is just a way to be in fashion or to show off as someone who has „visited” important authors. It’s because clichés usually come from brilliant sayings by brilliant authors, even if the names of those authors sometimes vanish and finally disappear from the public memory. Clichés also come from common

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experience as a form of the public spirit's creation based on and entailing stereotypes. In those cases we have some kind of a sum of cultural values and beliefs assumed by a given cultural community. Clichés are also the fabric wooden languages are made of<sup>1</sup>, and wooden languages don't die, they only change domains in time.

The problem is greater than we can imagine. Clichés seem to help us in so many ways that we feel we couldn't make it without them. Playing roles in our day to day life often entails saying things we do not necessarily believe in, but which are the right thing to say in a given context, and making use of clichés can save a moment. There are then situations when a quick answer is expected while we feel that only an elaborate one could be adequate: a cliché can save that kind of moments, too. Moreover, knowing clichés helps decode other people's discourses where they appear (following that part of any communication instance which Watzlawick called "relation", that is the meta-communication which helps in the classification of the content itself) and so understand why the enunciator had made use of them.

In a book I have always dreamed of writing myself – *The War Against Cliché* – the one who beat me to it, Martin Amis, talks about what the life of clichés can be, from hurting one another to making a good long life together over the years (Amis 2002). A story from that book caught my attention, probably because I am myself a victim of the clichés evoked. It is about the contradiction between what Americans think of themselves and the image Hollywood spreads in the world about what America is. The author is commenting on a book (Michael Medved's monograph *Hollywood vs. America*) and discovers that "Hollywood loved everything that America hated (violence, sex, swearing, drinking and smoking), and hated everything that America loved (religion, parents, marriage and monogamy, plus the military, policemen, businessmen and America)". The quoted passage Martin Amis gives at page 15 had the effect of a shower on me: I woke up to the fact that I had a movies-made cliché image of America, and that it evolved from the old time cinema to the present Hollywood productions. Here is the passage:

"In years past, in the heyday of Gary Cooper and Greta Garbo, Jimmy Stewart and Katherine Hepburn, the movie business drew considerable criticism for manufacturing personalities who were larger than life,

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<sup>1</sup> In a previous paper (Stoica 2007, 60-64), there is a suggestion for the reader to go and visit a certain web page in relation to the actual wooden language, the corporate language. I maintain the suggestion.

impossibly noble and appealing individuals who could never exist in the real world. Today, the industry consistently comes up with characters who are smaller than life – less decent, less intelligent, and less likeable than our own friends and neighbours”.

The cinema is a relatively recent medium of public communication but the impact it can have over the public is tremendous. We act the same way our beloved movies characters do, we copy their postures, their attitudes, then the fashion, the cars, the interior designs and even the lines they utter (’Are you talking to me?’ – who can say they never tried this in their lives, when looking at their image in a mirror?!). If we are talking about words, the lines taken from films are just a way of making use of famous phrases, and the power of spoken words is even greater than that of films, because they don’t come usually from a world of fiction, but from this world we share in our daily experiences. These phrases can come from all the imaginable sources, and their way to becoming clichés seems to be a question of chance. The more they are used and on a larger scale, the more the chances are to see phrases become clichés. Once entered in the category, the phrases are open to uses of all kind, depending of the characteristics of the users. This is, in fact, what triggered my attention and this is how I came to look into the destiny of some cliché-phrases, and I might keep doing that, in the future, in the case of other phrases.

## **2. Introduction**

Some time ago, I was listening to an interview with Professor Laurențiu Popescu, the doctor with the telocytes. With no previous arrangement – we do not know each other – and even without hoping, I heard him confirming something I have been long trying to make my students and even my fellow colleagues understand: the rule of compromising and the idea that everything can have a truth-value, but only within a context, only at a certain time. I was looking at this researcher of unquestionable value, who said that even the scientific truth is a “trend” – that is, prone to go out of fashion. And he even went so far as to say that the scientific truth is something that has YET to be proven fake, showing how each epoch had its own scientific truth. Hallucinating, right?! It is hallucinating, especially for those who are strongly anchored in certainties often obsolete and tied up to complex issues, for those “dumbfounded in the project”, for those who believe that accepting the compromise means compromising oneself.

All of the above serve me well, since my goal is to discuss phrases that made history and were outdated by the evolution of the world, but continue to echo in the hearts of those who seem to make it their personal duty to find places, instances of communication, moments when to voice them, over and over again. This is not about principles governing a field, or about words containing the concentrated wisdom of an era or a culture. These are words that have been enunciated mainly within the space of epistemological fields marked by complexity – such as communication – or within studies on complex phenomena – such as language. In the circumstances of their first enunciation, they were justified. Contexts have evolved – as it always happens with contexts! – and resuming former truths can have the most unexpected results. Coming back to my initial goal, I need to specify that I didn't chose to deal here with those phrases that have been wrongly translated and have been forcibly put forward as carrying totally distinct meanings than the meaning they had in their language of origin. It is enough to recall the difficulty of translating into French or English some Romanian opposing terms, such as *comunicare / comunicație (communication)*, to translate from French the opposition *langue/ parole*, or to juggle without failure and without any care with terms like *publicitate* or *relații publice (advertising or public relations)*, to make it clear that this is not the phenomenon to be discussed in what follows.

I will deal with four cases, all falling within the field of communication, as a very in fashion field for discussion.

But first, let us see why it is more and more often said that we live in an era of communication. People have always communicated. Moreover, it would be fair that the history of humanity was not divided into periods by the type of tools man used over time, but as others have also ascertained, by the various modes of communication characteristic to the various periods of time. I stick to the idea that when we say we live in the age of communication, we use a rather approximate translation of an English formula, the error coming from the “confusion” this language preserves between *comunicare* and *comunicație* (both terms are translated into English by *communication*). What grows amazingly significant and fast in this century is not communication, but communications. Paradoxically, it seems that, as communications evolve, communication is doing worse. It would be, I think, a lot fairer to say that the twenty-first century is the age of communications, and not the age of communication. However, I will accept the formula which is still in circulation: we live in the age of communication. A recent reading helped me adopt this position, as I found the following explanation in Deborah Cameron:

“we live in what might be called a ‘communication culture’. By that I do not mean merely a culture that communicates, nor one that regulates communicative behaviour (all cultures do both those things). Rather I mean a culture that is particularly self-conscious and reflexive about communication, and that generates large quantities of metadiscourse about it. For the members of such a culture it is axiomatically ‘good to talk’ – but at the same time it is natural to make judgments about which types of talk are good and which are less good. People aspire, or think they ought to aspire, to communicate ‘better’; and they are highly receptive to expert advice” (Cameron 2000, VIII).

Two things point to the quoted text: the existence of an appetite for metadiscourse in various instances of communication and the non-specialists’ openness to expert advice, with a view to communicate “better”.

Back to our concern! What this study brings into question are phrases like “A picture is worth a thousand words” or McLuhan’s famous phrase, “The medium is the message”. This undertaking is not risk-free: those who listen to / read me could take me for a destroyer of myths (which I would find serious, unbearable, and also wrong); I could be taken for an excessive idiosyncratic person, focused on my own ideas and trying to question what was, and still is, for many, the quintessence of theories in a field dear to us all, communication. I need to specify, in defence of my position, that I am particularly concerned with the professionals who use those phrases without understanding (anymore) their content, their original meaning, the one acceptable within the context of their enunciation, or with those who ignore the intention of the creator to shock by a clever stylistic choice. I am concerned with those who were seduced by the brilliance of the formula in itself, enouncing it as an immutable rule. I chose to leave aside those who, just like the character played by George Clooney in the movie *Up in the Air*, resort to stereotypes because they are hasty and stereotypes shorten the expression (the character in question says: “I stereotype. It’s faster”). The cliché may be admitted as one form of a communicated content, but it is most of the times objectionable when used as rational argument in a debate. In this regard, I consider the discussion proposed in this study highly useful.

A special type of cases occurs when signalling a possible primordial interpretation opens the phrase to an un hoped-for modern use, and still, totally different from the cliché. There are thus, happy cases as well.

### 3. A few phrases and their fate in time

#### *1. The medium is the message*

For those who have seen how the functioning of each of the “traditional” channels (television included) has modified, for those who have noticed the consequences of what is known as “media convergence”, and for those who understand well what multimedia means, McLuhan's phrase keeps a rather historical value, since its truth is always subject to continuously renewed reflections. When we take into account the fact that, most often than not, the transmission medium is part of the communication context, the discussion turns to the pragmatic importance of the context (together with this medium), and when we understand communication as an intersubjective negotiation of the realities in the surrounding world, we understand that all meanings reside in the interactants (see Preston 2009), and that they use the medium and the context however they want or, in other words, they do whatever they want with the medium, the context, etc.... Of course, it is more difficult to study a phenomenon that presents itself this way to us, but establishing modes (with fixed formulas, clichés, stereotypes and prejudices) does not help.

From the perspective put forward by this study, the idea of the existence of an appetite for metadiscourse on discourse in various instances of communication would be connected to the specialists' activity. I know things are not like that, but I intend to put aside the metadiscourse in the area of common verbal interactions. An interesting fact to notice, for the present approach, is to see why the famous phrase "the medium is the message" is still so successful, though, meanwhile, we reached the conclusions presented above. Let us get back to “Meanings are in people, not in messages” (Preston 2009). Ivan Preston, professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, United States, has an interesting way to rebel against the tendencies to propose simplifying and simplistic views on communication in the communication and media university studies: he draws attention to the difference between specialists and non-specialists (often teaching in universities, on the grounds of their position as successful practitioners in the field), a visible difference especially due to the analysis of the metadiscourse that each type of individual described above performs on communication. The non-specialists will yield to stereotypes, while the specialists will discuss things by taking into consideration all discoveries in the field of the complex phenomenon of communication. With an unmasked irony, Ivan Preston shows how, 50 years after completing his studies, the same

courses on stimuli and channels, on receivers and senders and on the techniques for preparing the news, advertisements etc. were still taught. The author mentioned here does not feel the threat coming from the true specialists in communication, but from the non-specialists that haven't updated their ideas yet. If an economist, specialist in marketing – who believes he masters marketing *communication!* – settles for building a clear message, thinking that, as clear as it is, his message will be understood by *everyone* and it will have the *same* effect on any recipient it reaches, a specialist in communication – a PR person, for instance – will know that the same message content will be turned into several communicated contents, according to the people who interact in each instance of communication. It is not the channel (the medium) which determines the differences in reception, but the characters who communicate at both ends of the channel. Even more so, the same communication medium can contribute to building a different meaning in different individuals-receivers. *Meanings are in people...*

Do not think I am trying to place myself in a position as to decidedly refute McLuhan's formula. There are, still, enough situations in which saying "the medium is the message" makes sense, and, more precisely, in the meaning Watzlawick gave to this observation, that each instance of communication involves a content and a relation, so that the relation classifies the content, turning into metacommunication. If we take, for instance, the evolution of habits related to wishes (greeting cards as they are called), we understand why the same content ("Happy birthday!") is received differently when transmitted *viva voce*, during a visit, the verbal message being accompanied, possibly by a hand shake, and when transmitted holographically, on a carefully chosen type of paper, or transmitted by phone, by email or SMS (and, in these latter cases, if the message is displayed as a content sent automatically, simultaneously to all the addresses selected from the electronic contact list, or it is sent to a single target recipient). In all situations described above, the decisive role will be played by the participants in the communication interaction and the context in which it is produced. We can imagine detached, young individuals, raised in an atmosphere that has not valued and still does not value details, and even facing great difficulties in finding differences between the scenarios proposed in the example with the "happy birthday" wish.

McLuhan's words remain somewhat valid even in statements concerning the media; nevertheless, they lose that status of absolute truth, and, thus, they can seldom serve as an argument in a debate on a related

issue, especially since, as mentioned above, we are witnessing the phenomenon of media convergence (as in cases such as the written press review presented in a TV show, printing a scene from a movie, as support for the understanding of a newspaper text, etc..).

#### **4. A photography is worth a thousand words**

In a natural logic, we can find enough moments when uttering this already famous phrase starts to work, being even considered irrefutable. The classical logic, closer to sophisms, would oblige us to specify from what point of view the truth of the enounced phrase can be accepted, and how is one “more worthy” than the other. Or, once this issue risen, here is the difficulty: is it the rational or the emotional aspect? Is the value of a photo a thousand times greater than the value of the word in any situation, or should we distinguish between the rational and the emotional plan of a communication interaction? This distinction is the starting point of our discussion...

It is known that one of the difficulties in understanding the content communicated by using verbal language is given by the fact that speech has a linear development, while thinking advances at once. A similar discussion on this subject can be also found in Saussure's *Course* (language, says the Swiss linguist, is not made up of data and, therefore, the presence of a segment of language does by no means anticipate what will follow). It is known that the recipient of an enouncement is not likely to anticipate what the enouncement will be as a whole, before the speaker finishes his/her enunciation (the interlocutors' common life experience, some elements that guide reading can be useful, but they may also be, in many cases, misleading). Not even Ducrot's beam theory (which states that the meaning of a sentence is given by the whole beam of possible continuations the enouncement presupposes) does not help too much, and here, one very good example is the poetic expression. For the well-known formula "green leaf of...", our folklore has kept a lot of possible continuations, without exhausting the local phytosphere; who would have thought, though, that “blue” could also be a possible continuation?! Well, it took a poet (Nichita Stănescu), for the beam of possible continuations to become inexhaustible. From that “green leaf of blue” from Nichita on, we can expect even more unthinkable formulae in the series beginning with "green leaf of...".

Starting from this little preamble, it can be reaffirmed that a content transmitted through verbal language cannot be thought before the

enunciation/ reading of the phrase is complete, which makes things happen in time. This explains the stronger effect on the rational component of verbal communication, and the weaker impact on the emotional component (over time, even the most successful constructions see how their power to produce emotions is instantaneously attenuated).

On the other hand, the image is perceived, at first, as a whole, just like thinking also functions, so that that the impression, i.e. the emotion, is transmitted immediately, with its entire strength. It is easily understandable that, from the very first contact, the image produces a strong effect, sometimes even a paralyzing one, blocking even the intention to analyze the image more thoroughly. From this point of view, an image is actually “worth” a thousand words.

One can make simple experiments to distinguish between things and to understand what happens in the two cases. A long time ago, I read about such an experiment. Two children aged about 8 years old were invited to learn something about the tiger. They were placed in two separate cabins and shown two different films: one of them was shown a video of a tiger walking through the jungle and lurking for its prey, while the other was shown a video displaying a text about a tiger (how it looks, where it lives, what it eats etc.). At the end of the projections, the two children were asked questions. When asked “How many stripes has the tiger on its back?” the child who saw the images was not able to answer, while the child who read the text about the tiger knew the right answer; when asked whether they were afraid of the tiger, the child who read the text said he could not feel any emotion, not at all fear, while the other said he had felt a thrill of fear crossing him when the tiger in the film appeared from the reeds and looked at him with its green eyes. Another example could be extracted from the movie *Squid and Whale*<sup>2</sup>. A teenager coming from a torn family tells the psychologist how a long time ago, when he was just a kid, he used to go to the Museum of Natural Sciences, accompanied by his mother. He was afraid of the whale and the squid, which he could only look at through his fingers, as if to feel safer. Each time, while returning home, his mother would “tell” him the whale and the squid and – the teenager said – this time he was no longer scared. Putting the image into words could address the mind in another way, closer to reason and far from emotion.

We all know that we cannot “tell” Van Gogh’s self-portraits, but we can always remember how they hypnotized us. We all remember how

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<sup>2</sup> Script and direction by Noah Baumbach.

sometimes we happened to let ourselves lured by the beauty of an image and, therefore, we were unable to describe it in detail. Emotion has prevailed over rational reading. We also know how we have formed mental images after reading some texts or after listening to a story, and we also know that the emotions triggered in these cases were based on analogies with images previously seen elsewhere.

It is unavoidable to put things right: receiving contents transmitted through direct verbal communication relies directly on reason and grants emotion a smaller place (in a first approach, of course!), while receiving visual contents requires less rational thinking and leaves more room for emotions. Thus, a picture moves (perhaps sometimes) more than a thousand words, but a thousand words inform rationally more than a photo, and the emotion they convey is as strong as the one transmitted visually; but it appears later, its settling with time granting it a greater persistence. Words are often able to help us see things that would otherwise escape our perception. It would probably be helpful to recall here how Daniel Arasse (Arasse 2008) helps us see Tintoretto's painting, *Venus and Mars Surprised by Vulcan* (1579):

“Usually, Mars and Venus are portrayed naked, lying on the bed of adultery, caught in the net thrown by Vulcan, warned by Apollo. We can see none of these in his painting kept in Munich. Venus is naked, this is clear, beautifully lying on the bed. But she is not alone. Mars has hidden under the table, wearing his armour and helmet, while Vulcan, one knee on the bed, lifts the diaphanous fabric that hides his woman's sex. Next to them, under the window, in a swing, Cupid is asleep”. [My translation]

With an informed eye, you are now beholding the scene, and you even notice Mars's head (which you could have missed!), and you imagine, perhaps, that Tintoretto wanted to exalt, by a counterexample, the virtues of marital fidelity.

What I want to emphasize here is that a comment in articulated verbal language may favour a certain perception of an image, even if this is proposed by the high art created by a great painter. The idea is not unique and I do not think we will stop here. I quote, in this respect, John Berger, with his *Ways of seeing*, which shows a similar position: verbal language orients visual perception and also decides the class in which the image perceived will be included.

Moreover, assuming that our minds work through the language we speak (the mother tongue, according to Whorf-Sapir) or, in Humboldt's view, language is thought, we come to conclude that even the non-verbal

(hence the photo) is understood during reception because it is involuntarily and instantaneously “translated” into the verbal. The non-verbal moves at first impact, but it is understood by complete perception, the one that involves the verbalization of the content perceived.

What about the phrase that started the discussion in the first place? Using this phrase in enunciations adequate to the context, with a clear understanding of the separation within which the enunciation must be understood, cannot be harmful. But establishing the content of this phrase as absolute and immutable truth can only be an error. A tolerable error when committed by a non-specialist in communication, and a serious error when committed by a specialist who intends to use it in supporting arguments in a debate.

## 5. Special cases

### *An embarrassing case: 7/38/55*

I should begin with a formula like “Poor Albert Mehrabian!”, especially after finding on the internet his own lamentation regarding the fate of these famous words – he actually uttered! – concerning the percentage of the verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal in communication acts. Instead of rejoicing the existence of a “myth of Mahrebian”, the psychology professor does not cease to explain to all who listen that he was misunderstood, that he shouldn’t be quoted by those who did not understand what he was talking about when he gave his famous 7/38/55. Transmitted from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation, even through writings of specialists in communication (!), the phrase “in communication, only 7% is verbal, the non-verbal occupying 38%, and the paraverbal 55%” is still legendary. There are, of course, critical receivers of the enunciation of this phrase, and the irony becomes the reaction of those who feel something is wrong with this statistics, but yet do not go to the source and see what caused the “enormity” in question. Rhetorical questions of undisguised irony such as the following ones are already well known: “must I understand that, when I ask a passerby how to get to a certain place, it is more useful to pay attention to the inflections in his/her voice, his/her look, clothes, posture, and much less to words containing the information itself?”. There are other researchers who think that, the poor decoding of the message of Mahrebian’s words, gives rise continuously to the famous “recipes” with which are doped those who prepare for job interview or other (often public) types of discourse: they are told how to look at their interlocutor/interlocutors, how to keep their

hands, how to sit on the chair or how to shake hands, without too much emphasis on the words that should be used to describe themselves or to declare their desire to be accepted by the others.

Sad! Sad even for (poor) Mahrebian, sad even for the development of the research field called *communication*! How is it that there are so few people who shudder at least at hearing that such proportion between the verbal and the rest was established by studies? How is it that there are so few of those trying to find the source of the phrase and find out how this percentage was reached?! It is left for me to wonder how is it that there are so few of those who write books (as a result of research, we would think) in which the argumentation is based on “the myth of Mahrebian”. We have all read at least one such book.

Briefly, Albert Mahrebian’s study considered the reaction of some subjects (who were, after all, only women, since the psychology professor failed to convince any man to participate!) when hearing a single word; they were also suggested only to place each word heard in the interval “I like it/ I do not like it”. The result was the famous 7/38/55. Gone with the wind, the result stirred things up and led to developments on this subject, that were completely out of hand.

It would be enough to think that the paraverbal cannot exist outside the verbal, by being the way the verbal is produced, to find the difficulty to “wolf down” such a strange report.

I shall close this part of the study proposed here with the same formula I started with: “Poor Albert Mahrebian!”.

## 6. A happy case

Under the heading special cases I preserved, for the brightest end possible, the story of a widely used old saying: *Verba volant, scripta manent*.

In a Europe administered for two centuries by the science created by Napoleon, *scripta* was and remained holy. What is written can be stored and can serve as proof if or when needed. A Europe marked by a growing tendency to stay away from uncertainty (*uncertainty avoidance*, as Geert Hofstede named this criterion for the classification of nations/cultures) causes people to look for unbeatable ways to ensure the safety of their relationships with the others. The spoken word flies and cannot serve as evidence in a case of litigation. Instead, what is written remains and constitutes an evidence for any further argument. The *topos* “written + positive” (thus, “said + negative”) has been operating for over a couple of hundred years.

However, Professor Alexandru Călinescu proposes an interpretation in which only the *topoi* change. In a conference hosted by the Romanian Academy branch in Iași, Alexandru Călinescu suggests we consider that, in the ancients' perspective, *verba* was better, because it flies, thus gets richer and, even more so, escapes setting, while the *scripta – manent* – stiffens and, in time, loses value. Flying, *verba* grows richer, gathers meaning and acquires new significance. Fixed, *scripta* ends up, just like the wooden language, barely saying anything.

The cognitive dissonance is maximal: we are suggested not to ignore the ancients, but to listen to them and understand them according to a perhaps completely different decoding, based on the *topos* opposed to the one functioning for so long in the European cultural space.

I would say that they do not cancel each other: we can continue using the phrase *Verba volant, scripta manent* in the sense that we used to since Napoleonic times, but we can also accept that the second *topos*, the one proposed by Professor Călinescu, is valid. We can also consider “written + negative” and “said + positive”.

The context and the paraverbal could serve to privilege one of the two possible readings of this phrase. The story, however, seemed not only seductive, but also important for the study of communication based on textemes repeated in different contexts and different ways of enunciation.

## 7. Conclusions

Phrases come to life in sentences, while the meanings reside in people. The context decides!

On the other hand, what is allowed to the non-specialists – that is, to blindly use famous “sayings” about communication – cannot be pardoned to specialists, called to establish, through a solidly built consensus, the science they chose to serve. We have seen that the specific of our age is to meta-communicate about communication. But the non-specialists and the specialists are expected to do that differently. This may be the only way by which the latter can always be distinguished from the former. Therefore, words enunciated with a certain effect in certain circumstances should be used with caution in new contexts, for their value – just like the value of any segment of language! – is related to their enunciation, which is contextual.

This study starts from already well established facts (by the great Master Eugene Coșeriu, for instance) supported by many other studies, many of which published in the *wake* of the Master. The instance of

communication is a unique event, never repeated, because, just like events, it *cannot* be repeated. Each enunciation is unique and it lasts for as long as the utterance lasts. If I utter (thus, I enunciate), now, in front of an audience, the phrase “any enunciation is unique”, then I remain silent for one second and utter (again!) “any enunciation is unique”, careful to use the same tone, the same voice intensity, and even the same gestures, the second utterance will be a new enunciation (and a unique one, as I have already said): it occurs in a context in which the first utterance will have already been produced! Therefore, the second utterance does not require an answer to the question “what does the speaker mean?”; it rather waits for an answer to questions like “why does the speaker repeat what (s)he has just said?”, or “did the speaker think that I hadn’t heard what (s)he said, or does (s)he consider it so important that (s)he keeps repeating the words to emphasize the importance of the content”. Other interpretations are possible (such as: “I think (s)he likes so much to hear him/herself speaking, that (s)he is repeating what (s)he has just said”).

Events can be talked about, but they cannot be repeated, being, inevitably, unique, simply because they are contextual. Since the contexts are unique, the events are unique as well. The phrase (or, as the case may be, the text) is created by the enunciation (or by the discourse) and kept in the memory of the linguistic community to which it belongs. It can be infinitely repeated. Each time we will be in the presence of a new enunciation or a new discourse, because every time things will occur in a new and unrepeatable context. Building a context following exactly the pattern of a previous one, X, will not result in a context identical to X, but in one similar to it. This second context will contain new information which is a “copy of the context X”. So, it will be different from the first one.

On the other hand, the strength of the context is also easily noticed while reading: the context will determine the meaning of a particular content, and when we say “context” we have in mind the protagonists of the communicative interaction. This explains how words that have had a specific meaning in a given context change their meaning when reused, because “reuse” means “use in a new context”. If some of them turn obsolete, others downright stupid, while others become even more interesting than their original authors would have thought it, all this is due to context change. Who would have thought, in the days of Napoleon, that people, among whom a professor from Iași, whose name is Alexandru Călinescu, will propose a possible reading, radically different, of the phrase that seems to have served as the basis of the French Empire administrative construction and, later, of the entire Europe?!

Finally, if we bring into discussion the perception of the non-verbal, it is enough to recall the opinion of (at least some) psychologists, according to whom the non-verbal is understood because, during its reception, it is “translated”, instantly and involuntarily, into the verbal. It either tells me what I saw/ smelled/ felt by touch/ heard etc., or it tells me how I should feel/ see /hear etc. The limits of my world are the limits of my mother tongue, said Wittgenstein. My limits, I should add, are all those you might have noticed in the statement above...

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