4. LECTURE

Today, I would like to talk about what is, in my view, *the most fully developed theory of human communication: that of social theorist Jürgen Habermas.* From this theory, we can derive criteria for successful or unsuccessful communication and for the quality of qualitative data. It is baffling that textbooks on qualitative data analysis make barely any mention of this fundamental theory.

1. SPEECH ACT THEORY

In the second lecture, I introduced you to the *use theory of meaning. Wittgenstein's* idea that "the speaking of language is part of an activity" paved the way for *speech act theory*, which was founded by the British philosopher *J. L. Austin* in his book *How to Do Things with Words (Austin 1962).*

Abb. 4.01: John Langshaw Austin (1911 – 1960)[1]

Speech act theory is concerned with the action context of linguistic utterances. According to this theory, we perform actions by uttering words. For instance, when we:

- Make an assertion about how something is
- Ask or order other people to do something
- Promise to do something ourselves
- Express our thoughts, feelings, or experiences
- Alter reality using our words

Linguistic utterances are embedded in a social context: assertions, expressions of wishes or desires, orders, and questions do not just possess a *meaning*, but also, above and beyond their semantic content, create *obligations* between speaker and addressee. For instance, by uttering "I'll come round this evening," I commit to keeping my promise. If I do not do so, I must justify why I broke my promise or risk losing my social trustworthiness.

Speech acts are not confined to simple utterances. Examples of complex speech acts include telling a joke or story, apologizing to someone, conducting a debate, flirting, proposing marriage, pronouncing a legal judgment, interviewing someone, or analyzing a text. These complex speech acts are made up of simple speech acts and accompanying nonlinguistic actions. Some speech acts can or must be performed in writing; one example is entering into a legal agreement.

[1] Source : https://aeon.co/essays/how-the-thought-acts-of-the-oxford-don-j-l-austin-live-on

2. COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Building on these ideas from linguistics and philosophy of language, the sociologist and social theorist *Jürgen Habermas (born 1929)* set out a comprehensive action-based theory of communication, to which we shall now turn our attention. *Habermas* is regarded as the most important living German social theorist. He works in the *critical theory* tradition of the Frankfurt School (whose leading figures include *Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer*, and *Erich Fromm*). As a public intellectual, he has participated in almost all major social debates since the 1960s through to the present day. Most recently, he has published on the Ukraine war and the danger of a nuclear strike. His work advocates a democratic Germany and Europe, and has helped to shape Germany's intellectual climate.

Abb. 4.02: Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) [2]

His most important work is the two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1985), in which he sets out a theory of society that integrates *Alfred Schutz's* concept of lifeworld (lecture 3) with speech act theory and psychoanalytic ideas about subjectively distorted communication. What typifies his approach is the way he is able to synthesize fundamental ideas from philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and psychoanalysis into a single coherent theory. His work combines lifeworld-based and systems theory approaches to everyday life, allowing the effects of objective living conditions on everyday life to be analyzed and explored. To paraphrase a well-known saying, you could describe *Habermas* as a giant standing on the shoulders of giants.

Before we delve into his rather abstract, challenging theory, I would like to give you a flavor of *Habermas's* vision of "friendly living together"–that is to say, his vision of a kind of communication that is not dictated by power relations, but in which participants seek to achieve mutual understanding *(Verständigung)* on a voluntary, nonhierarchical basis.

Allow me to quote from an interview in which *Habermas* talks about his *"fundamental intuition"*:

The intuition springs from the sphere of relations with others; it aims at experiences of undisturbed intersubjectivity. These are more fragile than anything that history has up till now brought forth in the way of structures of communication—an ever denser and finely woven web of intersubjective relations that nevertheless make possible a relation between freedom and dependency that can only be imagined with interactive models. [...] They are always ideas of felicitous interaction, of reciprocity and distance, of separation and of successful, unspoiled nearness, of vulnerability and complementary caution. All of these images of protection, openness and compassion, of submission and resistance, rise out of a horizon of experience, of what Brecht would have termed "friendly living together". *This* kind of friendliness does not exclude conflict, rather it implies those human forms through which one can survive conflicts. (*Habermas 1992, p. 125*)

I believe that in times of fake news and hate speech, *Habermas's* vision of "friendly living together" and a "domination-free discourse" *(herrschaftsfreier Diskurs)* is more relevant than ever.

For anyone who wishes to embark on the intellectual adventure of reading *Habermas*, I recommend starting not with the *Theory of Communicative Action* itself, but rather *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas 2001).* Once you have become accustomed to his complex but lucid style, *Habermas* can be a joy to read.

3. TYPES OF ACTION

In *The Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas 1985), Habermas* takes as his starting point a fundamental question: how can people live together in a society? His action theory shares with Marxism the view that an agent is *both the product and creator of* their social environment. He draws a fundamental distinction between *instrumental or object-related action* (e.g. building a house) and *social action* (e.g. the process of coordinating and reaching agreement among the builders working on the house).

He draws a further, ideal-typical distinction between *understanding-oriented* and *strategic* forms of *social action.* Understanding-oriented action means engaging with your interlocutor without ulterior motives and without attempting to pressure or manipulate them, so that they are able to freely make their own decision. This allows agents to reach consensual agreement in decision situations and conflicts through persuasion rather than coercion.

By contrast, strategically acting agents will attempt to achieve their goals with or without the consent of other agents, either by using methods such as bullying or offering rewards *(open strategic action),* or by pretending to be acting in an understanding-oriented manner *(concealed strategic action).* The agent may be aware of the deception (*deliberate manipulation*) or unaware (*distorted communication*, as for instance when someone, unbeknownst to themselves and seemingly with "the best of intentions," manipulates their partner). For clarity, it should be noted that these are ideal types that usually do not occur in a pure form in everyday communication but as a blend with varying degrees of understanding-oriented communication and manipulation.
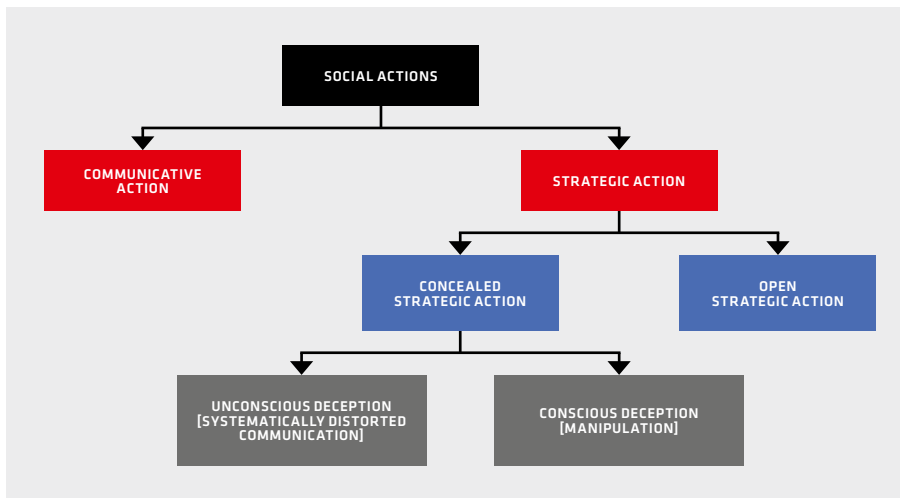
Abb. 4.03: Types of action (modified from Habermas 1985, p. 333)

The distinction between these types of action is also highly relevant when assessing the truthfulness or credibility of qualitative data (linguistic utterances, texts, multimedia documents). When conducting a qualitative data analysis, we must assess for each document the extent to which its creation was understanding-oriented and the extent to which it involved strategic communication/manipulation. It is instructive to keep asking this question when we encounter texts such as adverts.

4. LIFEWORLD AND COMMUNICATION

From the perspective of agents, the site of social action is their everyday lifeworld. *Habermas* took the concept of a lifeworld from *Alfred Schutz (lecture 3)*. However, he reinterpreted the originally phenomenological concept through a communication theory lens. On *Habermas's* view, we cannot understand and gain access to the lifeworld of concrete individuals through the phenomenological method of "eidetic intuition" (that only leads to the lifeworld of the phenomenologist!) but, in line with *Clifford Geertz's* theory of culture *(lecture 2)*, through lived involvement in social interactions. *Habermas* formulates a *general rule of intersubjective understanding:*

Intersubjective understanding, because it is a communicative experience, cannot be carried out in a solipsistic manner. Understanding *[Verstehen]* a symbolic expression fundamentally requires participation in a process of reaching understanding *[Verständigung]*. Meanings—whether embodied in actions, institutions, products of labor, words, networks of cooperation, or documents—can be made accessible only *from the inside*. Symbolically prestructured reality forms a universe that is hermetically sealed to the view of observers incapable of communicating; that is, it would have to remain incomprehensible to them. The lifeworld is open only to subjects who make use of their competence to speak and act. They gain access to it by participating, at least virtually, in the communications of members and thus becoming at least potential members themselves. *(Habermas 1985, p. 112)*

This general rule applies equally to a growing child entering into a lifeworld for the first time, to someone learning about an unfamiliar group, to a social scientist who wishes to study the lifeworld of a person or group of people, or to a qualitative data analyst analyzing the meaning of texts, multimedia documents, or artifacts. (It should be noted that this rule is also implicitly applied in quantitative social research and neuroscience at the point where linguistic communication comes into play, and so at the very least when interpreting the collected data).

In *Habermas's* theory, a lifeworld comprises both a material substratum, in the form of animate and inanimate nature (including the environment molded by human activity), and a symbolic component, which is what we are concerned with here. According to *Habermas*, this symbolic component consists of (1) *culture*, a stock of knowledge and the basis for any attempt to achieve mutual understanding, (2) *society*, the "social bond" of a communication community in which the cultural stock of knowledge is transmitted between people, and (3) *personality*, the communicative competences of each individual participant in communication.

5. BASIC CONDITIONS OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Communicative action can only be analyzed in context. It occurs in *social situations*, when certain demands, problems, or conflicts give rise to a need for communication, information, or mutual understanding. Each social situation is a segment of the participants' lifeworld. This segment becomes a *theme* for at least one participant as a result of their goals and interests. Other defining elements of a social situation are *place*, *time*, the *social relations* among the participants, and the objective and subjective *boundary conditions* relevant to the theme.

In a qualitative data analysis, this contextual information is essential in order to understand linguistic utterances, and so it is important that it is documented along with the qualitative data.

The background to communicative utterances ("speech acts") is constituted by how the participants define the situation; a certain degree of overlap between their definitions is necessary if they are to reach understanding. Otherwise, they will first need to negotiate a common definition of the situation. It is at this point that the limits to any process of mutual understanding will become apparent if, as a result of ideologies, "alternative facts," and conspiracy theories, it is no longer possible to achieve any common ground between participants' definitions of the situation.

By reaching a mutual understanding about their situation, the communication participants solve their everyday problems. They also use and renew their cultural stocks of knowledge, reinforce their social relations and group memberships, and, especially if they are still maturing into adulthood, develop their communicative agency and identity. Maintaining and renewing the lifeworld of a social group and its members is thus dependent on participation in a "fabric of communicative practice."

Abb. 4.04: Example of a social situation involving a need for mutual understanding (based on Schulz von Thun 1981)[3]

To illustrate this point, let us take an example from *Friedemann Schulz von Thun's 1981* book "Miteinander Reden" ("Talking with Each Other"). In this social situation (fig. 4.04), a couple are traveling in a car together. The theme is the way the woman is driving. Their hypothetical goals are to get to their destination more quickly, but also to "win" their argument. The temporal, spatial, and social boundary conditions include their being pressed for time, an intersection/traffic light up ahead, and their relationship as a couple. How the man defines the situation: "You're not paying attention!" How the woman defines the situation: "Stop telling me what to do!" There is a conflict that may create a need for mutual understanding. (But it may also be that this exchange has become a kind of "ritual," so that mutual understanding is no longer possible or desired!)

Against this backdrop, let us consider the process of reaching understanding. By analogy to the philosopher *Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)*, *Habermas* inquires into the *condition of possibility of mutual understanding* (Kant's *Critique of Pure Judgment*, by contrast, is concerned with the *condition of possibility of knowledge*). According to *Habermas*, this condition is satisfied if speaker and addressee comply with four basic rules or *validity claims*:

1. They must speak *intelligibly.*
2. With respect to the world of facts, they must be *truthful.*
3. With respect to the world of social relations, they must communicate *appropriately.*
4. With respect to their inner world of intentions and feelings, they must be *sincere.*

These four validity claims correspond to four relations to the world, which are present in every linguistic utterance:

1. The cultural world of language (criterion of *intelligibility*)
2. The objective world of facts (criterion of *truth*, e.g. the sentence "I was born in Berlin")
3. The social world of interpersonal relationships and norms
(criterion of *appropriateness*, e.g. "I won't tolerate personal insults!")
4. The subjective world of feelings, desires, intentions, and thoughts
(criterion of *sincerity*, e.g. "I feel hurt")

[3] Source : https://www.ztg.tu-berlin.de/download/legewie/5_vl.htm

The term *validity claim* indicates their significance for successful communication: the participants in communication have a reciprocal *claim* on their interlocutors and can expect them to follow these rules.

The following table summarizes the validity claims, their relations to the world, and the systems of (scientific) discourse developed to resolve unclarities, problems, conflicts, and misunderstandings at each level.

RELATION TO THE WORLD	VALIDITY CLAIM	SYSTEM FOR RESOLVING UNCLARITIES AND CONFLICTS
"World of language"	Intelligibility	Philosophical discourse: conceptual clarification
Objective world	Truth	Theoretical discourse: natural sciences
Social world	Appropriateness	Ethical discourse: legal system
Subjective world	Sincerity/authenticity	Therapeutic/aesthetic critique: psychology/history of art

Although the table presents the various relations to the world separately, they usually occur *together* in one and the same linguistic utterance: every communicative act makes reference to the linguistic, objective, social, *and* subjective worlds. When I speak, I am simultaneously saying something about the world, about my relationship to my interlocutor, and about myself (aspects of content, relationality, and self-presentation).

However, the validity claims of understanding-oriented action are only rarely fully satisfied in practice. *Habermas* writes:

What is typical instead are situations that lie in the gray area somewhere between a lack of understanding *[Unverständnis]* and misunderstanding *[Missverständnis]*, intended and involuntary insincerity, veiled and open disagreement on the one hand, and an always already existing pre-understanding *[Vorverständigtsein]* and mutual understanding on the other. In this gray area, agreement must be actively brought about. Mutual understanding is a process that seeks to overcome a lack of understanding and misunderstanding, insincerity toward oneself and others, and disagreement. And it does so on the common basis of validity claims that aim at reciprocal recognition. *(Habermas 2001, p. 137)*

While deliberate untruthfulness is attributable to competing interests and power conflicts—and hence to inequality, oppression, and a pressing for advantage—involuntary untruthfulness is rooted in self-deception, delusions, and neurotic conflicts among the participants in communication.

We might ask what import validity claims have if they are not usually satisfied. The answer:

• Validity claims serve in our everyday communication as a reciprocal "leap of faith" in our interlocutor's trustworthiness and accountability. Minor breaches that have little impact on the goal of mutual understanding are typically tolerated, in line with the "et cetera clause" formulated by American sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011). This clause, which is essential in everyday communication, stipulates that "small" unclarities and disagreements in communication can either be cleared up later or considered immaterial to the agents' current goals.

• According to *Habermas*, we normally tacitly presuppose these validity claims as ideals. If the addressee believes these claims have been grossly infringed, they can make a metacommunicative demand and insist that the speaker complies with them. Depending on which of the four validity claims they take to have been infringed, the addressee can criticize the speaker's utterance using:

1. Linguistic arguments ("You're being unclear")
2. Empirical arguments ("That's not supported by the facts")
3. Normative arguments ("That's below the belt")
4. Psychological arguments ("That's not how you really feel")

The last column in the table p.59 lists the systems of (scientific) discourse that have been developed over millennia of human intellectual history to resolve increasingly fine-grained unclarities and conflicts with respect to these fundamental validity claims (in terms of terminology, objective truth, social appropriateness, and sincerity/authenticity respectively). Philosophical discourse serves to clarify linguistic terms, the theoretical discourse of the natural sciences concerns itself with the world of facts, and ethical discourse and the legal system adjudicate what is appropriate in our social interactions. Each individual's inner world, meanwhile, is accessible only to themselves. Unclarities or problems in their utterances about this world cannot, by contrast with ones concerning objective facts or social norms, be resolved through discourse; they can only be addressed by therapeutic critique (e.g. psychological or psychiatric evaluation) or, in the case of expressive action (self-presentation, fashion, art), by aesthetic critique. By choosing the word *critique* (or *criticism; Kritik* in German) rather than discourse, *Habermas* emphasizes the special status of the inner world that is accessible only to the individual.

Qualitative data analysis must likewise meet quality standards that go beyond the validity claims of everyday communication. The standards are expressed in hermeneutic discourse, in the critical methods of historical and literary studies, and in the various quality controls applied to qualitative methods. As we will see, the validity claims described in *Habermas's* theory of communicative action play a special role in these standards.

6. THE LIMITS OF UNDERSTANDING

Habermas's theory also emphasizes the *limits of understanding*. The biological, psychological, and social conditions of action are only ever partly transparent to agents. People are "'entangled' in their histories": they are never just active agents, but also to at least some extent passive "sufferers" at the mercy of their circumstances. The problems they must contend with can be divided into ones of *"outer"* and *"inner"* need. On *Habermas's* definition, "outer need" relates to the suffering caused by oppression, exploitation, violence, illness, age, and death. "Inner need," meanwhile, relates to our interpersonal conflicts, spiritual, mental, and emotional harms, and the depths of the human psyche. People only ever have imperfect control over and understanding of their objective circumstances, inner conflicts, and ways of achieving mutual understanding, which is why self-reported data can only ever paint an incomplete picture of their lived reality.
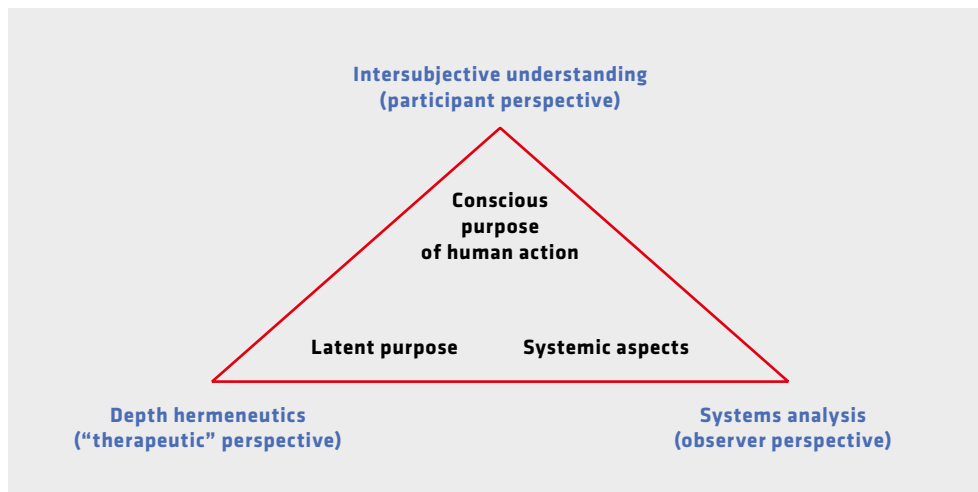
Abb. 4.05: Threefold approach for qualitative social research according to Habermas

No social science can gain an adequate understanding of a society if it examines that society solely through the prism of its members' lifeworlds, since these subjects' perspectives and opinions leave their own cultural identities and norms unquestioned. *Habermas* therefore believes the social sciences must take a threefold approach to their objects of investigation:

• Analyzing human beings' "outer need" requires an objectivating observer perspective in which human action and suffering are viewed as part of a larger systemic context. A lifeworld analysis must therefore be augmented by an analysis of biological, ecological, economic, sociological, and political systems. This is the place for quantitative analyses, statistical data collection, and systems modeling, which are essential in modern societies for the provision of public services and planning for the future.

• By contrast, understanding subjective perspectives requires interpretive *(verstehende)* methods, which in turn require participation in communication processes. Some of the most important methods: collection and analysis of qualitative data; participatory observation; conversations/interviews; and analysis of historical documents, human artifacts, media,

and works of art. (The results of representative surveys are also qualitative data, but this data is collected in a highly standardized communication situation and then converted into quantitative data.)

• Analyzing "inner need" requires a special interpretive method that goes beyond the subject's perspective and allows us to disentangle their self-deceptions and distorted communication. For such cases, the theory of communicative action draws on the methods and ideas of depth hermeneutics, which enable investigators to explore repressed thoughts, feelings, and conflicts (see "Reflections on Communicative Pathology" in *Habermas 2001*). These methods also involve an interpretation of qualitative data. At the same time, expressing our inner world through acts of self-presentation and works of art is a fundamental human need; such expressions are not always rooted in an "inner need" but can come out of experiences of beauty, happiness, and joy in life.

7. ASSESSMENT

Habermas's theory of society focuses primarily on communicatively rational subjects' capacity to reach mutual understanding. His theoretical framework can also provide a basis for social research and qualitative data analysis. We will later see how *quality control criteria* for qualitative data obtained from interviews and other communicative methods can be derived from Habermas's concept of validity claims (lecture 6: *Texts as qualitative data)*.

Habermas's *theory of communicative action* provides a *comprehensive theoretical account of human communication* and hence also a *methodological foundation for qualitative research and data analysis*. If we compare this highly abstract theory with the actual day-to-day reality of our communicative relations, it will seem (to borrow a phrase from the German sociologist *Ralf Dahrendorf (1929–2009))* like a *sociological "homunculus" (Dahrendorf 2006)* that paints an "artificial" picture of human beings. This is true to some extent for all theories of human action when they are measured against the rich complexity and abundance of everyday life; for one of the key functions of sociological theories is to abstract and simplify so that we can more easily get a grasp on our object of investigation.

But when assessing the *theory of communicative action*, I think it is important to note a certain one-sidedness: *Habermas* is a rationalist through and through. He only acknowledges the power of emotions and spirituality in human communication and interaction through the role he accords to psychoanalysis and depth hermeneutics.

8. PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION

- What types of social action does *Habermas* distinguish?
- Discuss *Habermas's* critique of the phenomenological concept of a lifeworld, and how he expands on that concept in his theory of communication. What are the components of a lifeworld?
- Discuss the significance of a *social situation* and its defining elements as a unit of analysis for social action and for qualitative data analysis.
- Can you think of examples where strategic and understanding-oriented action are intermingled?
- What can be the motivations for concealed strategic action?
- What is meant by the "relations to the world" and "validity claims" of communicative utterances?
- Why are validity claims also preconditions for successful mutual understanding?
- What role do incompletely satisfied validity claims play in achieving mutual understanding and why is the et cetera clause important for communication?
- Explain the limits of understanding and the three different approaches that are necessary for social research.

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