

STEFAN FRYDRYCHOWICZ

AN ATTEMPT AT A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO THE INTERACTION - COMMUNICATION - CONTACT BETWEEN AN ADULT AND A CHILD¹

I. Problem

When an adult wants to approach a child, they usually reflect upon neither what they are doing nor whether what happens between them and the child is an interaction, a form of communication or making contact. The adult can observe the child's response and judge the adequacy of their behaviour aimed at getting close to the child on this basis. However, most frequently the adult is not fully aware of what the subsequent reactions of the child mean. Nevertheless, they can sometime decide whether contact with the child has been established and they can subjectively estimate its quality.

Professionals dealing with children are bound, however, to pose these questions:

1. In what way should contact with the child be established ?
2. What is the meaning of the child's response during an attempt to make contact?

In this paper we shall provide a few suggestions about the process of establishing contact with a child. We are interested in the kind of adult behaviour that promotes the establishment of a contact, or such behaviour which makes close contact with a child difficult if not impossible. Taking into account the fact that an individual act of behaviour gains full meaning in the context of concurrent behaviour, we shall analyse the whole process of entering a contact; namely, everything which happens from the moment the adult appears to the moment the contact is established.

¹ The above article is a changed and extended version of the article entitled „What Are Children Allowed in Social Communication and what Adult Should Not Indulge”, published in *Studia Psychologiczne, Zeszyty Naukowe WSP Bydgoszcz*, 1993, 9, 31-42.

The determining of the essential features of communicational interaction understood in this way first requires a theoretical analysis of the relationship of the interaction, communication and contact, and, then, a verification of our data.

Interaction is a simultaneous activity of two or more people, whose actions are interdependent or mutually conditioned /Newcomb, Turner, Converse, 1965/. By other authors /Watzlawick, Helmick Beavin, Jackson, 1972/ interaction is identified in a series of messages exchanged by individuals as opposed to a single message, which is communication. Bullowa /1980/ claims that interaction is a broader concept than communication. Communication takes place during interaction but its existence can not be claimed unless two conditions are met:

1. the content of the message exchanged between two people has the same meaning for both of them, otherwise communication is not complete,
2. the message is emitted to be received and to cause a certain response in the recipient /intentionally/.

Thus, the two basic features distinguishing communication from interaction are meaning and intention. At the same time, Bullowa /1976/ defines communication as an activity that signals something about the signaler. We shall add that a certain element of behaviour is communicative only when it is distinguished from other elements. Hence, to meet the postulate of communicative behaviour implies both the necessity of its differentiation and of ascribing different meaning to it.

In their extensive work on adult - child interaction, Babska and Shugar /1986/ consider a few dimensions to be as important in the structure of an interaction.

1. an equilibrium between giving and receiving,
2. an alternative taking the first and second positions in the adjoining pair. /An adjoining associated pair being defined as the basic type of speech: e.g. speaking-listening, call-response, question-answer/.
3. the changeability of assumed roles /positions taken in the interaction systems, e.g. a position of domination, a position of submission/,
4. arriving at a common meaning /mothers, keeping to the subject the child is talking about, having the opportunity to share the meaning, arriving at a common meaning or to modify the meaning/.

However, the correct course of an interaction requires an adult to join the stream of the child's activity and to recognize the two-directional influence. This is a process described as the two-subject construction of interaction events.

Bokus /1984/, when studying interactions between little children, treats interaction as a mutual interaction between two streams of activity /more exactly, two streams of socially directed behaviour/ coming from one child and the another. According to her, contact is only possible when there is a common field of attention. It may be a common subject of activity or perception or a common topic of conversation.

Communication is defined: „ /... / as an activity causing an organism or a system at a given place and time, R, to participate in stimuli or experiences of another individual or a system present at another place and time, E, by using the elements of knowledge common to both parties. /Moles, 1986, p. 25/”, or, according to Miller /1980, p. 157/: „Communication takes place when the events at a certain place and time are closely related to the events occur-

ring at a different place and time.” Crystal /1980, p. 158/ claims that: „/.../ a model of the act of communication generally accepted in semiotics is a collection of interacting events or non-events emitted by different communicational subsystems or modalities emitted and received simultaneously.”

In his work Scherer /1984, p. 74/ defines the „interactional communication” as: „/.../ a process in which two or more people oriented to one another, according to the sequences of aim oriented behaviour, send mutually convergent information using the configuration of multi-channel signs”. Social contact can be talked about when at least two people are concentrating on each other, on a common subject or on an object of common interest /Vandel, Mueller, 1980/. The essence of contact is also well illustrated by the statement of Strzemieczny /1987, p. 66-67/ „‘Working with a child, I always try to get into as close a contact with it as possible. In practice, this means that I express my interest in it and my willingness to play with it. I try to focus my attention on the child, respond to its behaviour and contact it actively. I think that in this kind of work most important is to focus one’s attention and be there for another human being, to concentrate one’s consciousness on that person /.../’”.

Coming back to communicational interaction, we think that interaction may be viewed as a sequence of events taking place between an adult and a child or another adult. Some of the events are communicative i.e. are the actions that carry common information and are intentional. At the same time they signal something about the signaler. Contact is considered as the effect of interaction and communication i.e. as an aim. When contact is established, interaction and communication may be maintained. A feature differentiating interaction, communication and contact is the degree of closeness between the relevant people. It is the least in interaction and the greatest in contact. A characteristic feature of communicational interaction is the direction: interaction → communication → contact → further interaction. It should be stressed that not every interaction is a communication and not every communication is a contact. On the other hand, each contact and communication seems to be included in interaction.

We suggest that when the subject of concern is establishing contact, we should talk about contact-aimed communicational interaction and not about interaction, communication and contact separately. The perspective of analysis is then broadened, which provides the chance to discover the structure of the process of establishing contact.

Henceforth, we shall talk about contact-aimed communicational interaction and treat this triad as a process. We are interested in the structure of the process, which means that we are looking for particular elements /stages/ and interrelations among them as well as trying to estimate the contribution of an adult and a child to this process.

II. Method

The data on the process of contact-aimed communicational interaction were collected in a kindergarten. The room where children aged 5-6 were playing, was entered by students,

one at a time at appropriate time intervals. The situations of 48 adults trying to establish contact with a child were recorded by a video camera. We monitored the situations of freely establishing contact between an adult and a child, and each event was the first time the child and the adult saw each other.

The method applied was a microanalysis of the video material, which, in our case, allowed us to recognize the ordered elements of the behaviour of the adults and the children, before comparing them in order to find the relationships combining the elements into a whole process /Condon, 1984/.

At first the purpose of the analysis was to find out what an adult and a child do when they meet each other for the first time.

The analysis was performed in groups of 8-10 students and the author, where particular sequence of the films were repeatedly reviewed and scrutinized, and individual interpretations of the facts were compared. After some time we realized that if we wanted to determine the structure of contact-aimed communicational interaction, the problem of our work should be put as follows: which elements of the adult promote an establishment of contact with a child and which hinder it.

We started to analyse step by step the actions of those adults successful at establishing contact with a child and the errors of those unsuccessful at it. The scheme that we arrived at illustrates what actions adults should subsequently take to establish good contact with a child. We also believe that each case of entering into contact may be treated as a modification of the scheme given below.

In the material presented below, we did not analyse quantitatively the adult's behaviour. We concentrated on the course of establishing contact between the adult and the child from the point of view of adult behaviour promoting contact or hindering it.

III. Structure of contact-aimed communicational interaction

Let us focus our attention on the process of establishing contact between an adult and a child. It covers the time from the adult's entrance into the room where the child is to the moment of starting a common activity with the child. The process includes three phases:

- a. entering into contact,
- b. passing into closer contact and being in it,
- c. passing into close contact and being in it.

Each of the phases comprises several stages. In the table below we use the term functional stage with two meanings: 1. The stages fulfil certain functions according to the phase they belong to, 2. The functionality of a stage means that the adult's behaviour should fulfil the function typical for a certain stage. In practice. Some functional stages may be carried out by different forms of behaviour. The table also specifies the transition to the next stage requires the child's permission.

Table 1

A scheme of contact-aimed communicational interaction

Phases	Functional stages achieved by adults
A. Entering into contact	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The appearance 2. Initial visual contact 3. Waiting - to give the child the time to get acquainted with the adult 4. Entering the next visual contact
B. Passing into closer contact and being in it	<p>child ' s permission to pass on to closer contact</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Transition to individual distance 6. Adjustment /adaptation/ 7. Entering into indirect close contact
C. Passing into close contact and being in it	<p>child' s permission to pass on to close contact</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Moving intimate distance 9. Making close direct contact 10. Common activity

Now , firstly, we shall characterize, the individual functional stages playing particular attention to the way they are carried out and, secondly, we shall present other conclusions resulting from the analysis of the collected data.

1. The appearance

The appearance or the manifestation of one's presence is the stage initiating an entrance into an interaction. In our studies an appearance meant that an adult entered the room where the children were. In the situation we studied, it was difficult for the adults , in our case students. To free themselves from anticipations and expectations as to the course of the process of entering into contact. Typical concerns were: How quickly will I be able to establish a contact? Will it be easy or difficult for me? What strategy of entering into contact should I take? etc. This state of concern affects the internal state of the adults making them tense and in consequence unable „to be in the situation” Such an adult cannot receive the information emitted by the child or implied by the whole interactional situation, openly or undisturbed by personal emotions.

2. Initial visual contact

This is usually done by an exchange of short glances which permit mutual localization, initial estimation of distance and perhaps initial orientation as to the relaxation-tension of the other's body. This kind of glance provides the child with the information an adult person has appeared and perhaps other information perceived subconsciously; the same is true for the adult. Perception of this short glance cast by the child furthers contact, or otherwise it is impossible to pass to the next stage without forcing the contact.

Thus, it is very important to be sensitive to the child's glances as its perception and requital are important in the opening of a contact-aimed communicational interaction.

3. Waiting-to give the child the time to get acquainted with the adult

We have observed that adults able to establish contact with a child do not come directly to close contact. It is not only the shortening of the distance that we mean here. Either a closeness or a distance can be estimated by the tone of voice, the position and the distance /Hall, 1978/.

These adults were calm, unobtrusive and rather prepared to wait for the child to come closer or give a clear signal permitting the adult to approach. It looked as though the adults gave children the time „to get used to” them. The adults took a certain place of their choice and stayed there, at some distance from the child. This is the time for the adult to quieten, if they still need it and for the child to equilibrate the presence of the adult.

4. Entering the next visual contact

At the end of the above- described period of time, another visual contact takes place. The glances are now longer, and classified as intermediate, between short /instantaneous/ glances and scrutiny when looking at another person. These looks hold the function of expressing mutual interest and permission to pass the next stage of contact-aimed communicational interaction. It is essential to grasp the semantics of the glance / acceptance, surprise, nervousness, disregard etc./

At this stage, adults have a tendency to give prolonged looks, thus, fixing the child and sometime giving the impression of „sticking” the child onto an invisible screen or wall. Such looks expressing the will to dominate the child may be received by the child as threatening and therefore cause its withdrawal.

As follows from more general findings concerning glances and their exchange /Cook, 1984/, eye contact as such is difficult to maintain or, contrariwise, there is a tendency to avoid it. When a child notices that an adult looks at him/her, it concludes that the adult is interested in him/her and wants to get closer.

Papoušek and Papoušek, 1983 p. 122 / emphasize the essential meaning of visual contact between parents and infant / parent-infant interaction/: „Visual contact is obviously another important circumstance playing a multiple role in parent-infant effectiveness. The

attainment of visual contact is a crucial condition for delivering the infant other than through acoustic messages. Last but not least, all our evidence indicates that the infant's visual contact is feedback information telling the adult caretakers how much attention they have attracted, what the infant is interested in and what it prefers to avoid. In our concept of behaviour as mechanism that helps selectively either to increase or to reduce the amount of informational input /.../".

5. Transition to individual distance

This transition is related to the change from the social to the individual distance /Hall, 1978/. It becomes possible for the adult after the child's permission. This permission may be given visually by a prolonged look expressing interest, acceptance etc. as well as by movement of the child's body towards the adult. The adult shortens the further stage of individual distance /120 - 75 cm/ by walking toward the child. On the border between the further and the closer phase /closer phase 75 - 45 cm/ the adult lowers himself / herself to the level of the child. This is the first symptom of adaptation.

6. Adjustment / adaptation/

Students who have good contact with children may use different ways to adapt to them. One of the possible ways is to lower themselves to the child's level / because of the height difference/. Let's notice as Hall /1978/, does, that standing up and looking at someone from above, from a distance of 2.1 to 1.2 m., may give an impression of domination. Observations in the kindergarten show that adapting one's level to the child's level is particularly important in stationary situation, while in a dynamic one, when the adult and the child are moving, it is not always necessary.

Adaptations to the child is also achieved by adjusting the pace of one's activity to that of the child, or by the intentional arrhythmization of one's pace of an activity e.g. when one wants to soothe the child. This kind of adaptation is possible on the basis of the functioning of the interpersonal synchronization mechanism /Condon, 1984, Hall, 1984/, which involves a mutual synchronization of the body movements and the speaking rate of both parties. The above-described behaviour belongs to what is called a polymodal adjustment /Bandler, Grinder, 1979/. This means that one reflects consciously or subconsciously a fragment of the behaviour of another person, e.g. the grimace of sb's face, a frown, a characteristic gesture, and, hence, elements of mimicry and pantomimicry, the way someone is breathing or speaking, etc.

Adjustment understood in the above sense is consistent with the proposition of a multi-functional and multichannel understanding of communication /Cosnier, Brossard, 1984/. They found that essential in what an adult emits is the coherence among the three subsystems: verbal, vocal /prosody of speech/ and mimical-gesticulatory system of communication.

We should also note that the child adapts itself, too. The child imitates mimicry of the adult also for the pleasure of getting into interaction /Bower, 1978/.

7. Entering into close indirect contact

At a further stage of the contact-aimed communicational interaction, both adults and children sometimes introduced something which we shall refer to as „an object substituting /for/ direct touch”. Such an object is, for example, a doll the child holds and, at a certain moment, gives to the adult, a brooch pinned on the student’ s dress which has attracted the child’ s glance; it can be any object given from hand to hand. The function of such an object may be sometimes fulfilled by an appropriately uttered sentence or word, e.g. the question „What is your name ?”

A characteristic feature of such an object is that it attracts the attention of both sides, or it is related to the intimate sphere of one person or the other, whilst, at the same time, not being a part of the body of either of them. Consequently, when such an object appears in the space between the child and the adult, it can fulfil the functions of substituting for a direct touch. Contact via such an object does not violate the sense of security to such an extent as a direct touch. Thus, an approach is possible without entering fully into intimate contact. It should also be noticed that one can easily withdraw from such an indirect form of close contact.

To sum up, „an object substituting direct touch” may appear in situations when direct touch is premature, or when it can result in the child’ s withdrawal. Such an „object” did not appear in every situation of establishing contact, sometimes without this intermediary a direct contact was established.

8. Moving intimate distance

Moving intimate distance usually followed the child’ s signals of permission. They can be called signals of a child’ s opening to the adult. These signals may take different forms: a smile, an encouraging gesture, an open position of the child’ s body /the child is sitting cross legged opposite the adult, legs loosely crossed, body leaning back supported by arms/. We have also observed changes in 1. the dynamics of the adult’ s movements: they were slower and more precise, 2. the way of speaking: the adults reduced the volume of their voice and speaking pace as well as articulated with greater precision.

9. Making close, direct contact

The confirmation of close contact is a touch. We mean, the kind of touch that follows the earlier course of a communicational interaction, the touch that completes this process. This does not mean that the adult and the child cannot touch each other earlier, e.g. when giving and receiving the object /stage 7/ their hands may touch by accident, yet, such a touch is an assignment.

We found the first direct touch was never strong. It was not an „acquiescent” touch but one „confirming” a willingness to enter into a close contact. We noticed that adults, being in close contact with a child confirmed their closeness by direct touch, sometimes repeating it many times. In our opinion, the function of direct touch may also fulfil a deep, attentive look or a word loaded with particularly positive emotions.

10. Common activity

As the contact-aimed communicational interaction developed, students proceeded to a common activity which usually took the form of common playing. An adults’ s co-operation in the play was not limited to following the child step by step but the adult was very attentive and aware of what the child was doing and what it could be doing without, however, too quick suggestions as to the possible developments of the activity. The adult also expressed a willingness to help the child when a difficult problem was encountered or when the child itself wanted assistance. The adults did not control the developing activity and when a certain activity was exhausted, they suggest a new line of activity.

IV. Discussion and conclusions

The above observations were intended for the determination of the structure of contact-aimed communicational interaction. We described and analysed the behaviour of adults when favouring contact establishment. We asserted that individual stages are functional in character, which means that it is important that the adult’ s behaviour fulfils functions adequate for the individual stages of contact-aimed communicational interaction.

Ghiglione /1985/ claims that the most important feature of communication is a conveyance of sense. It seems that a more general sense of all the aforementioned stages of entering into contact is the conveyance of information about closeness-distance, trust-distrust, sense of security, sense of threat, co-operation-lack of co-operation, permission for closeness-lack of such permission and many others. This sense should be, however, communicated in the right sequence and, thus, we talk about the sequentiality of the functional stages. This means that none of the stages can occur at a place different from that specified in the structure of contact-aimed communicational interaction. If, for example, a direct touch takes place in the stage of entering into first contact, this touch cannot be treated as the kind of touch expressing permission to enter into intimate distance, but it has a function of entering into contact.

Let us consider now what happens when sequentiality is disturbed. Observations prove that when one of the stages is skipped or when the adult uses nonadequate means of its implementation, the whole process of coming into contact is disturbed. These disturbances result in the child’s withdrawal from the already achieved stage, in increasing the distance or in blocking the contact, e.g. a child is sitting cross-legged opposite the adult, legs

loosely crossed, body leaning back supported by arms at a distance of about 60 cm from the adult. At this moment the adult tries to approach the child but his/her movement is too quick and one of the hitherto relaxed legs of the child is raised and blocks the adult preventing close contact. When the initial smile or glance of the child is treated as permission for closer contact /which frequently happens on a tram or a bus and then the adult often says something like: „What is your name?” or „What a nice boy?"/, the child may stiffen and withdraw from the situation.

The structure of communicational interaction has also its own rhythm, which means that each stage has its own optimum duration for its realization. For instance, when the adult remains in the place of his/her own choice for too long /1st stage/, the functional value of this behaviour is lost, and it means something different than: „I give you the time to get used to me”.

Another important feature of contact-aimed communicational interaction is the possibility of condensing the stages. We talk about condensation when a given kind of behaviour of an adult or a child cumulates a few functions. This leads to an acceleration of coming into contact and a spatial limitation of this process. This is a time-space modification of the course of contact-aimed communicational interaction. A condensation of the stages explains the differences in pace of coming into contact, which also depends on the communicational competence of the child and the adult as well as on many other situational factors.

In this process of entering into contact an adult enters the room where the children are and tries to establish contact with one of them. In situations of professional child-care, the order is usually reversed. We do not think, however, that the order of appearance has a particular modifying effect on the course of the individual stages. Perhaps the exception is the first stage, when it is not the reversed order which is important but the fact that the child appears first and it is the entrance of the child not the adult. Such a situation may imply that a child subjectively feels greater responsibility for the course of entering into contact. It is our belief, however, that the stages of the process of coming into contact are co-created by both sides, the personal contribution of the participants depending on the assumption of a dominant, submissive or equivalent position as well as on the participants' earlier defined aim of the contact.

In this paper we have concentrated on coming into first contact between an adult and a child who see each other for the first time. The situation is different when it is the parents contacting their child. In this case the contact is recurrent, and each subsequent one is set in the previous one and uses the achieved degree of closeness, which, however, may be easily reduced by any improper behaviour of either of the sides.

The communicational behaviour of parents towards infants is to a significant degree intuitive. Papoušek and Papoušek /1983 p.121/ proposed the term „intuitive parenting” to describe „the didactically important responses under a minimal conscious control”.

We do not think that parent' s behaviour towards their children is based on intuition to such a significant degree. Communicationally competent parents who can establish a good contact with other children may improve the communicational competence of their own children. As follows from the studies by Whitehurst /1976/, Sonnenschen and Whitehurst /1980/, children improve their communicational competence when they are in contact with communicationally competent parents.

The scheme of contact-aimed communicational interaction is meant to be a proposal for understanding of the process of coming into contact. As a proposition it does not claim to provide a fine explanation of all the complexities of interaction, communication and contact.

References

- Babska, Z., Shugar, G. W. /1986/: *Idea dwupodmiotowości interakcji dorosły-dziecko w procesie wychowania w pierwszych latach życia*. Lublin, KUL.
- Bandler, R., Grinder, J. /1979/: *Frogs into princess: neuro-linguistic programming*. New-York, Andreas.
- Bokus, B., /1984/: *Nawiązywanie interakcji społecznych przez małe dziecko*. Wrocław, Warszawa, Lublin, Poznań, Kraków. Ossolineum.
- Bower, T. G. R. /1978/: *Le développement psychologique de la première enfance*. Bruxelles. Mardaga.
- Bullowa, M. /1976/: *From non-verbal communication to language*, *Linguistics*, 172, 5-11.
- Bullowa, M. /1980/: *The beginnings of interpersonal communication*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Condon, W. /1984/: Une analyse de l'organisation comportementale, /w/: Cosnier, J., Brossard, A. /eds./, *La communication non verbale*, Neuchâtel, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Cook, M. /1984/: Régard et le regard réciproque dans les interactions sociales, /w/: Cosnier, J., Brossard, A. /eds./, *La communication non verbale*, Neuchâtel, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Cosnier, J. Brossard, A. /1984/: Communication non verbale co-texte ou contexte, /w/: Cosnier, J., Brossard, A. /eds./ *La communication non verbale*. Neuchâtel, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé.
- Crystal, D. /1980/: Prozodyczne i parajęzykowe korelaty kategorii społecznych. /w/: *Język i społeczeństwo*, Warszawa. Czytelnik.
- Ghilione, R. (1985/: Communiquer! Vous avez dit communiquer? *Psychologie Française*, 30-1, 3-10.
- Hall, E. /1978/: *Ukryty wymiar*, Warszawa, PIW.
- Hall, E. /1984/: *Poza kulturą*, Warszawa, PWN.
- Miller, G. A. /1980/: Psychologia i komunikacja, /w/: *Język w świetle nauki*. Warszawa, Czytelnik.
- Moles, A. /1986/: *Théorie structural de la communication et société*. Paris, New York, Barcelone, Milan, Mexico, Sao Paulo, Masson.
- Newcomb, T. H., Turner, R. H., Converse, H. E. /1970/: *Psychologia społeczna*. Warszawa, PWN.

Papoušek, H., Papoušek, M. /1983/; Biological basis of social interactions of research for an understanding of behavioural deviance. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 24, 117-129.

Sherer, K. R. /1974/; Les fonctions des signes non-verbaux dans la conversation. /w:/ Cosnier, J., Brossard, A. /eds./, *La communication non verbal*, Neuchâtel, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé.

Sonnenschein, S., Whitehurst, G. J. /1980/; The Development of communication: When a Bad Model Makes a Good Teacher, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 3, 371-390.

Strzemieczny, J. /1987/; Nie ma indywidualnego zbawienia, *Nowiny Psychologiczne*, 58, 66-74.

Vandel, D., Mueller, E. /1980/; Peer play and friendship during the first two years. /w:/ Foot, H. C., Chapman, A. J., Smith, J. R. /eds./, *Friendship and social relations in children*. Chichester, Wiley.

Watzlawick, P., Helmick Beavin, J., Jackson Don, D. /1972/; *Une logique de la communication*. Paris, Edition du Seuil.

Whitehurst, G. J. /1976/; The development of communication: changes with age and modeling. *Child Development* 47, 473-482.