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The Ethical Nature of Strategic Ambiguity in Organizational Communication

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Strategic ambiguity came to the attention of researchers specializing in organizational issues a few decades ago, attracting both adherents and opponents. An inherent part of the communication process, strategic clarity emerged as a result of strategic thinking, against the challenging background of the need for change, imposed by organizational dynamics. As a communication strategy, the roles of discursive ambiguity refer, among others, to its use in strategy documents, in the plan of relations with other institutional entities, etc. some ethical reflections on this form of communication.

Keywords: strategic ambiguity, clarity, organization, ethics

Introductory Considerations

In the series of facets that complete the ubiquity of communication, there is, in semantic antagonism with another important attribute of the process, namely clarity-ambiguity. According to the norms that govern communication, the attributes of clarity, coherence, and conciseness are decisive for it to be successful. However, communication, being a tool through which man identifies resources and optimal ways to satisfy different needs, has acquired new valences, which complement its usefulness. In this idea, strategic ambiguity has benefited from a remarkable concern among specialists in recent decades.

Commonly used in strategy and communication, strategic ambiguity has as its main structural element intentionality (a reference characteristic of the communication process). The insertion of unclear, equivocal aspects into the discourse generates confusion among the audience. At the level of perceived meanings, we can speak of plurality in interpretation, the benefit being on the part of the communicator, user of strategic ambiguity. Moreover, a defining feature of strategic ambiguity is denial, the fact that the argument can be denied. It is a characteristic that derives from the evasive nature of communication (ambiguous), which also has the potential and adaptability necessary to test the receiver's feedback to new suggestions. Discursive ambiguity allows for the saving of appearances, delaying conflicts, testing receptivity to new ideas, but also eluding personal responsibility (Clampitt, 1991).

The concept of *strategic ambiguity* remains indisputably linked to the scientific personality of Eric Eisenberg (1984), who approached it in relation to the organizational environment. In this author's view, the statement regarding the absolutism of the need for the attributes of openness and clarity to represent the general objectives in organizational communication is, in principle, struck by nullity. Communication is not concerned

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with the revelation and distribution of an objective reality that exists *a priori*, but constitutes a process based on interaction, one through which meanings are constructed (Watzlawick & Weakland, 1977).

In terms of utility, the scope of applicability of strategic ambiguity is quite broad, as stated in the specialized literature: (i) It supports unified diversity, (ii) it maintains privileged positions, (iii) it encourages denial, and (iv) it is a factor of organizational change (Eisenberg, 2007; Eisenberg & Goodall, 1977).

There are other positive aspects, of real importance, not only useful, but even necessary for the proper functioning of the organization. Thus, the use of strategic ambiguity would prove its efficiency in resolving difficult situations, conflictual ones, in optimizing relations between employees, but also in the effort to achieve the proposed objectives. The appeal to strategic ambiguity is considered appropriate in resolving difficult situations when "circumstances seriously limit the probability of successful persuasion" (Williams, 1976, p. 17). In this way, the presence of disagreement is diminished, which directs the focus of the organization's members on aspects on which there is agreement, to the detriment of those on which opinions diverge (Williams, 1976, p. 17).

The advantages of this type of communication—briefly presented in the introductory part—are counterbalanced, to a certain extent, by the ethical component. For example, strategic ambiguity is considered by some authors (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000) as both ethical and unethical. The first classification considers the situation in which strategic ambiguity is used in order to transmit complete and unbiased information, and the unethical facet would exist when the informational insufficiency and the size of the favorable are considerable (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000, p. 147).

The part of the paper that addresses the ethical dimension of discursive strategic ambiguity presents this specialized perspective that has both ethical character and those who care about an opposing point of view.

Ambiguity as a Discursive Strategy

Philosophically, ambiguity allows for a multifaceted approach, based on: constructivism, relativism, and interaction.

Constructivism emphasizes the power of language as a form of mediation in the interpretation of reality, arguing that the universal world is objectively non-existent in its absence. The logical continuity of such an argument takes into account the interconditioning of a person's knowledge: Newly acquired knowledge is possible through the development of previous knowledge. As things stand, ambiguity serves as a vector capable of "unlocking" new levels of understanding (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 229).

The paradigm of linguistic relativism distances itself from the conceptualization of language as the main instrument in the interpretation of reality, considering that the human individual is the one who assigns meanings, these not necessarily being implicitly attached to the utterance.

The third perspective promotes, axiomatically, the idea that any action is potentially communicative (Watzlawick & Weakland, 1977), the context in which the act of communication takes place being responsible for fulfilling the meaning.

As a discursive strategy, ambiguity has its source in variables such as hesitation to articulate an idea/suggestion/decision, the desire to capture several aspects simultaneously, within the discourse. Ambiguity can also be spoken of if a statement carries multiple meanings. In this latter idea, some authors (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017) observe that ambiguity can be based on contradictory meanings, and, at the same time, agreement on the overall strategy must be present, an aspect that does not have, in any way, the effect of diminishing the decision to take collective action. Moreover, it has been found that, procedurally, ambiguity

represents an easy tool for situations in which the proposed approach strategy meets very vaguely, or not at all, the agreement of the members (Denis, Dompierre, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011).

It is also discursive ambiguity that provides users with opportunities to analyze the specific roles of the strategy development activity, being favorable to the distribution and redistribution of guilt, a process conditioned by the way in which the respective strategy works (Sillince & Mueller, 2007). Moreover, the type of communication in question also represents a way of preventing the institutional entity and its representatives from losing ground in the situation in which a strategic approach should be withdrawn in its entirety (Eisenberg, 2007).

A distinctive feature of discursive ambiguity is its ambivalent nature, which can be both effective and ineffective. It demonstrates its effectiveness when it appeals to figures of speech to clarify, suggest, and create unity around an idea, and its lack of effectiveness can appear at the level of a transaction process, for example, when, as is known, it is desirable to avoid any trace of doubt.

Eisenberg conceptualizes ambiguity through "detailed literal language as well as imprecise figurative language" (1984, p. 230). However, even within the horizon of such a semantic framework, discursive ambiguity remains a difficult concept to theorize. According to the same author, "ambiguity arises in an organization when there is no clear interpretation of a phenomenon or set of events" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 259). He also wants to specify that the sphere of manifestation of ambiguity is not limited to the organizational environment but also "within the cultural experience of individuals" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 259).

A way of defining discursive ambiguity similar to that promoted by Eisenberg is "the lack of clear, consistent information" (Kahn et al., 1964, p. 23). When the aim is to encompass inconsistent meanings or, conversely, meanings that cover too many directions, ambiguity arises. This may be the result of the linguistic style itself, which should not automatically imply the idea of "part of a formal, logical deduction involving an interlocutor, but with a singularity located outside the subject of the respective exchange" (Komesaroff, 2005, p. 633).

The attributes that give substance to discursive ambiguity—lack of clarity in the presentation of information, its evasive nature, inconsistency of argumentation, subjectivism, frequency of metaphors in language, inability to maintain a logical balance, supported and based on evidence, etc.—can assimilate it to the notion of deception. It is the idea in which specialists such as Buller and Burgoon (2003) have identified the elements by which ambiguity is dissociated from deception: First, in that it can be both correct and wrong, then, it can equally well be neither wrong nor correct, and, finally, in that it can be metaphorical speech, and that's it. As for "deceptive language", the situation can only have specifically negative connotations: It is based on falsification, concealment, or equivocation (Buller & Burgoon, 2003, p. 99). The two authors support their claims by explaining that speakers who resort to ambiguous speech have, rather, a hypothetical approach, attempting an exercise of imagination about how things would look, without the pre-existing intention of misleading their interlocutor, deceiving him through false content.

A possible overlap of meanings with the notion of deception, in the given context, could be given by elements such as uncertainty, imprecision, slowness derived from the uncertainty of arguments, retention, retracting information, common to ambiguity and deception. In addition, Buller and Burgoon (2003) also mention a "behavior of protecting the image and relationships" (p. 100).

Beyond the characteristics considered by a good part of researchers, positive, strategic ambiguity is not necessarily simple or free from problems. If, as has been shown, for some of them (Buller & Burgoon, 2003), the elements that differentiate it from deception are clearly expressed; others go even further, associating it not

only with deception, but also with lying. More precisely, ambiguity is placed on the border between lying and deception, and those who practice it, at the organizational level, can use it to deny their own actions and evade criminal prosecution (Tyler, 1997).

In turn, Markham (1996) and Miller, Joseph, and Apker (2000) have found that this communication process is not received with the same enthusiasm by everyone. While some appreciate the potential of ambiguity, practicing it without hesitation, there is also the other side, the dissatisfied, who find it demanding, on this basis, wanting an active involvement of institutional management (Markham, 1996; Miller et al., 2000).

A third point of view nuances the idea of an inability of organizations to control the ambiguous messages transmitted by members in their relationship with stakeholders. The latter, against the background of the inability to penetrate and adequately interpret the messages, may manifest resistance and division, instead of acceptance and unified diversity (Davenport & Leitch, 2005).

Among the roles played by discursive ambiguity, as a communication strategy, we can list—mainly—its use in strategy documents, in the mission statement, and in the plan of relations with other institutional entities, respectively, at the level of changes in the organization. To these, several other functions have been added, within the organizational framework, including: (i) messages or information contained in an incipient, unfinished format, or that requires interpretation; (ii) gaining a temporary reprieve in pressing situations (which depend on obtaining information or a certain decision); (iii) addressing controversial or potentially conflictual issues; (iv) promoting organizational changes depending on the acceptance of stakeholders; (v) protecting, if necessary, a part of the organization, which is in a position of vulnerability, from closer examination (Wexler, 2009).

The semantic richness of discursive ambiguity can generate inappropriate opinions about its potential. For example, by presenting information in a truncated, insufficient manner, the receiver may reach a situation in which he adopts an erroneous decision. Research in the field of decision-making in the 1960s concluded that the human individual rejects less risky situations, given the awareness of specific alternative opportunities, than alternative risk scenarios in which the possibilities are completely ambiguous (Ellsberg, 1961).

Based on the data presented, it can be stated that the versatility that discursive ambiguity benefits from places it in a central position, making it preferable to other forms of communication, in an organizational context, and beyond.

Strategic Clarity-Ambiguity: Areas of Application

In contrast to ambiguity, strategic clarity can be seen as the ability to establish in precise terms the organization's working strategies, in an effort to effectively integrate into the spectrum of peer institutions, based on transparent, unambiguous communication.

Conceptually, strategic clarity emerged as a result of strategic thinking, against the challenging backdrop of the need for change, imposed by organizational dynamics. Strategic clarity can be said to be, in terms of importance, superior to strategic planning, as it provides transparency to the identity of the organization and the results obtained by it. For clarity, the underlying feature can be expressed by the organization's need to avoid, as much as possible, not solving problems, which is possible by adopting specific strategies (Adams, 2005). Strategic clarity has proven to be a useful tool in relieving a sensitive area in building organizational success, namely the conflict between employees' roles and their actual tasks (Ritchie-Dunham & Puente, 2008). James Ritchie-Dunham and Luz Maria Puente developed a model, called GRASP (2008), which presents the

dimensions considered by the two authors to be the main ones for strategic clarity. They attached to the notion of clarity the following elements that structure organizational activity: *objectives* (clarity of objectives), *resources* (clarity of resources), *activities* and *procedures* (clarity of activities and procedures), *structure* (clarity of structure), *employee role* (clarity of employee role). In formulating objectives, *clarity* must be the most important benchmark, as they always constitute the zero point from which any activity starts, indicating the line to follow. In principle, *resources* (tangible and intangible) ensure the success of an institutional entity, to the extent that it has the capacity to use them adequately.

The clarity of activities and procedures takes into account that the conduct of actions and the use of methods are in accordance with the established objectives.

The organizational structure is also an important dimension that contributes to the achievement of the intended results. The structure significantly influences the entire deployment of force at the organizational level, as it delimits the responsibilities of each member, regulates the flow of information (through the institutional hierarchy), and establishes the specific norms of the decision-making process. For all these reasons, the component in question must bear the attribute of clarity (Ritchie-Dunham & Puente, 2008).

In this entire configuration of functions, some more important than others, the major role remains that of the human individual, as an employee. He initiates, completes, and carries out any type of activity at the organizational level.

Overall, the organizational environment is complex, with a series of elements that underpin it. Among these, the climate occupies an important space through the influence it exerts on the collective. In this context, it is a reality that the communication process between members of the organization takes place in accordance with the specific organizational climate, the quality of the act of communication being less able to be related to a concrete, well-specified source.

From Eisenberg's (1984) point of view, clarity should be viewed as a relational variable, derived from the changing functional roles of the source, message, and receiver involved in the process and/or act of communication, and not considered implicit in the communication process (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231; Emirbayer, 1997). Additionally, Eisenberg (1984) considers that, in terms of efficiency, clarity is a factor that limits efforts to achieve organizational objectives, while ambiguity is an element of progress in this regard. The idea is supported by the reasoning that, as a rule, communicators have "multiple, often conflicting, objectives towards which they are oriented in an effort to satisfy rather than maximize the achievement of a particular goal" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Furthermore, clarity is an element worthy of consideration only when "a source has narrowed down the possible interpretations of a message and has succeeded in achieving a correspondence between its intentions and the receiver's interpretation" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 232). In other words, ambiguity is preferable to clarity, which happens with increasing frequency.

This way of thinking (Eisenberg, 2006), which also has other followers (Goodall, Wilson, & Waagen, 1986, in Eisenberg, 2006, p. 65), is counterbalanced by the category of specialists who draw attention to the inclusion of ambiguity in stable, exclusive frameworks of profitability. Thus, Jarzabkowski, Sillince, and Shaw (2010, together with Abdallah and Langley (2014), bring into debate the dual nature of ambiguity: Even if it has the capacity to make strategic activity more efficient, it can also generate conflict situations, as a result of the non-union of all members in practicing this method. The consequences relate to the emergence of blockages at the level of essential strategic steps. In essence, the suggestion is not necessarily to give up the use of ambiguity, but to resort to it with caution, depending on the context, namely, when it is really profitable.

Separated from the organizational framework, in which, in principle, it is "well seen", ambiguity, as a notion, refers to the idea of understanding eroded by insufficient knowledge of information. But ambiguity in the transmission of messages can also have as its source the communication style, which is specific to each person. Human nature is in itself a complex construction, an attribute that derives from the accumulation of factors that define it: education, character, level of training, intellect, personality, behavior, cultural background, life experiences, etc. Such variables are decisive in shaping the communication style, which leaves its decisive mark on interactions between people. As things stand, divergence of opinions, uncertainties are the domain of evidence. In this sense, specialists such as DeVito, O'Rourke, and O'Neill (2000) consider that uncertainty and ambiguity "increase the greater the cultural differences" (p. 107).

James Holland and Julian Webb (2006) found three factors responsible for the emergence of ambiguity: (i) Due to the multiple meanings and linguistic nuances they carry, words can convey different meanings from one user to another, an aspect that contributes to the complication of communication, creating semantic ambiguity; (ii) in the communication process, people quite frequently feel the inability to specify exactly what they want to convey, a context—again—favorable to ambiguity; (iii) the cultural background of origin can also constitute a significant barrier to effective communication, generating ambiguity in both the transmission and reception of the message (Holland & Webb, 2006).

A more diminished version of strategic ambiguity is communication that is based on avoidance, tangentiality, and conscious evasion of meanings, and is called "equivocal communication". The situation in which this discursive variant is resorted to is when it is found that any other form of communication would lead to negativity (Tyler, 1997, pp. 59-60).

The attempt to establish a correspondence between clarity and discursive ambiguity, to the extent that this is possible, points to the idea that clarity is not, and should not be, a norm, or some important benchmark against which to establish the degree of personal or organizational correctness in relation to communication. Instead, it can be described as a bridge between understandable and meaningless contents. In a somewhat similar vein, Eisenberg argues that, normally, clear communication "is not a linguistic imperative" even though it may be a concept based on cultural assumptions (1984, p. 228). Moreover, he does not agree with the idea of an ideal clear message, describing it as misleading, to the extent that clarity is a relational variable (as stated above, here), which "reflects the degree to which a source has restricted the possible interpretations of a message and has succeeded in achieving a correspondence between intentions and interpretation (p. 230).

Ultimately, "the construction of the future within the present as an open range of possibilities… is what we call 'hope'" (Komesaroff, 2005, p. 632). And, at least on the surface, ambiguity generates hope.

Ethical Reflections in Structuring the Message Specific to Strategic Ambiguity

We summarize the generous framework for defining ethics in a simple statement, which proves, from our point of view, adequate for this part of the work: a system of orientation for acting correctly, that is, by following rules, in order to achieve the intended results.

As an academic discipline, ethics seeks to identify explanations for those parts of morality that should be maintained, and criticizes those sides of conventional morality that are either inconsistent or that, for other reasons, should be modified. It can therefore be said that ethics is partly conservative and, in equal measure, radical, and at different stages in the history of societies, one or the other of these aspects is dominant.

The Socratic reflection on "how we should live", which underlies the entire system of thought on which the field of ethics is built, points to the eternal problem of the lack of harmonization of philosophical views on what should be considered/is good and right. Therefore, "it is difficult, if not impossible, for people with different moral views to talk about ethics" (Hill, 1995, p. 589).

The Aristotelian approach places virtue at the core of all actions of the human individual and analyzes moral character.

While for Bentham's utilitarianism, honest action involves evaluating the repercussions, cultural relativism disputes the universality of moral truth, supporting the codes that underlie cultural conduct. If, through the Social Contract Theory, Hobbes emphasizes the observance of the rules that any rational man does, with the awareness that this is for his own benefit, the Kantian vision marches on intention, which must be correct; only thus can individual action also be correct.

In teleological ethical systems, the effectiveness of communication can be a convenient criterion for ethical judgments. In deontological ethical systems, this is not the case, since deontological ethics is independent of consequences (Lewis & Speck, 1990).

Peter Drucker (1954) describes ethical behavior as a process of reflection and communal exercises on the moral behavior of individuals, based on the establishment and declaration of individual standards of value.

The endless philosophical debate on the ancient Socratic theme led to a new approach, namely ethical egoism, promoted in the middle of the last century by Ayn Rand, whose central idea is that human beings should act rationally, in accordance with their own interests.

A convinced advocate of strategic ambiguity, which he classifies as one of the most effective methods for organizational success, Eisenberg (1984) does not overlook the ethical component of using this type of communication. Applying the method with creativity and moderation leads to the desired results in achieving objectives; things can be done ethically.

Everything that is undertaken within an organization, from the simplest things to actions of heightened complexity, requires compliance with ethical norms. Communication, the glue of human interactions, clearly could not be an exception. Basically, "…the very act of communicating in the social context of a business culture implies an ethical basis, a respect for persons" (Mahin, 1998, p. 74).

Morris (2004) defines a moral problem as

> a choice between alternative courses of action, made unilaterally by an individual or a group of individuals, in which at least one of the proposed actions resulting from the decision involves modifying the life plan of another individual or group of individuals. (p. 353)

Li and Madsen (2011) argue that the standard of ethical behavior of a person, in the professional setting, should not be different from the standards that apply to personal life in general.

In its drive towards achieving objectives, strategic ambiguity can work to the detriment of ethics. And this is because, as a rule, strategically ambiguous communication emphasizes the vague form, weakened by the nuances that emphasize the meanings of the transmitted contents. Even if this is, in general, a feature of communication that cannot be completely avoided, when it is used perfectly consciously, with the determination dictated by the concretization of some goals, explicitly taking into account the ethical dimension becomes almost an imperative.

The mechanisms through which strategic ambiguity can act are not few in number, and even less in importance. For example, if at the level of an organizational entity, communication based on ambiguous messages is at the level of institutional policy, therefore, widely used, under the pretext that the results satisfy both receivers and senders, the latter can, if they want, deny ambiguous communication. By its nature, it allows such an option, the advantage of the bearer of ambiguous messages being to evade responsibility.

In relation to the professional environment, Danley (1980/1995) argues that moral responsibility should be found at the level of each member, and not attributed to the organization as a whole.

An interrogation of the type: "When is the use of strategic ambiguity ethical, and what are the contexts that place it in the unethical zone?" seems justified. Strategic ambiguity is ethical under the conditions in which the speaker's communication behavior is rationally consistent and logically consistent with the principles of ethics. The same ambiguity is unethical when, although the person usually has an ethical communication behavior, in one context or another, he chooses to enter the orbit of ambiguity, of course, with the motivation of achieving a goal. The inconsistency between the communication behavior formed over time and the "new" orientation, even if only a transitory one, places strategic ambiguity towards the lower limit of ethics.

A question that perhaps requires realistic reflection is to what extent the ethical communicator manages to avoid, with full consistency, regardless of the context, discursive ambiguity. The question is purely rhetorical; therefore, the admission that strategic ambiguity is used by both types of communicators (ethical and unethical), subject to different levels of frequency, is something that should not require further clarification. In a generic sense, it is not strategic ambiguity that diminishes the importance of ethics, but its intentional unethical use, to which can be added the ingenuity of communicators, who do not excel in adequately using the resources of communication. Ultimately, strategic ambiguity remains an option for users who adhere to a logically consistent ethical system, founded on the principles of ethics. Most likely, ethical choices are correct only when reason is the criterion on which these choices are made.

A determining factor for shaping an individual's ethical decisions is represented by their socialization environment. According to the results of studies undertaken by researchers such as Chieh-Peng Lin and Cherng G. Ding (2003), people have different opinions on ethical behavioral intentions, and the intentional plan is influenced simultaneously by: ethical attitude, personal values and perceived behavioral control, while one's own ethical attitudes indirectly influence personal values (Lin & Ding, 2003).

The framework for addressing strategic ambiguity in general, and in an organizational context in particular, brings to attention—again—the line of demarcation between deception and ambiguity, which remains an ethical issue. Essentially, as a rule, the organization adopts the type of communication in question to highlight that interpretation in which it is viewed most favorably (Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997).

Ulmer and Sellnow (1997; 2000) established several criteria by virtue of which the use of ambiguity can be ethical: *evidence*, *intention*, and *locus.*

Evidence: These are usually problematic to interpret, due to the type of rhetoric used or the figures of speech that surround the discourse. Evidence can be analyzed from the point of view of the degree of reasonableness, favorability, and fairness that the communication has on the receivers. Appealing to strategic ambiguity to alter evidence, to benefit interested parties, generates an ethical problem (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

Intention: This plays a key role in establishing the ethical character of an action. The intentional use of strategic ambiguity, aiming at misinterpretation, misleading, and deception, results in problems of social legitimacy (Seeger, 1986).

Locus: This criterion considers the situation in which responsibility is transferred to another party, in the case of an event with an unfavorable impact, in other words, exercising a role that involves assuming responsibility only when it is convenient, and attributing blame to someone else at critical moments, in the area of ethical issues.

These three criteria, identified by Ulterior and Sellnow (2000), can also be used to measure the extent to which ethics are respected in the application of strategic ambiguity at the individual level.

The issue of the ethical nature of discursive ambiguity in both the personal and professional environments remains—perpetually—equally current, widely open to academic debate.

Conclusions

Discursive ambiguity will always be present in the area of an individual's professional activity (and not only), whenever a minimum of two people engage in a symbolic interaction, to exchange information (Mead, 2003).

Even though there may be a sufficiently consistent practical consideration in maintaining clear and—at least theoretically—unambiguous communication in everyday procedural matters, careful management, tactical and strategic ambiguity can add value to communication if used in an ethical manner.

Finally, ambiguity is a form of "unknown-unknown", a consequence of the lack of knowledge of the cause and effect of the event (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

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