

Научная статья
УДК 81`1
DOI 10.18101/2686-7095-2025-1-39-44

**CONTEMPLATION ON THE THEORY OF DIALOGUE
FROM A BIOCOGNITIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE**

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Abstract. The current research essay discusses the issues raised by M. Kent and A. Lane in their analysis of the public relations scholarship on the application of dialogue theory. The scholars highlighted that dialogue as a phenomenon has been investigated in various disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, ethics, phenomenology, public sphere studies, public relations, and others. We suggest to draw upon the research approach of biology of cognition used in linguistics to explore this phenomenon. We believe it can be insightful for public relations research as at the core of all communication disciplines including strategic communication, PR and organization studies lies language and what people do with it.

Keywords: biology of cognition, cognitive linguistics, dialogue theory, mediated communication, public relations.

For citation

Rybalko S. A. Contemplation on the Theory of Dialogue from a Biocognitive Approach to Language. *Bulletin of Buryat State University. Philology*. 2025; 1: 39–44.

In a special issue of *Public Relations Review* devoted to exploring how organizations are using the Internet to communicate with their publics, M. Kent and M. Taylor [2] proposed the dialogic communication theory. They noted that understanding dialogic communication will contribute to our deeper understanding of the two-way symmetrical model, one of the four Grunig and Hunt’s models of public relations. In 2021, M. L. Kent and A. Lane revisited the basic tenets of the dialogue theory by clarifying the relationship between dialogue and two-way communication as the most misapplied concepts in public relations scholarship [7, p. 2].

The analysis of dialogue research in public relations literature published between 2017 and 2020 has revealed that the term “dialogue” has been primarily applied to the cases of two-way communication [7]. In the majority of the reviewed studies the researchers claimed to have analyzed dialogue when, in reality, they examined talk or user engagement as a strategic tool. In their essay, M. Kent and A. Lane [7] highlighted that studies of dialogue have a long history and mentioned that various disciplines examined this concept, i.e. philosophy, psychology, ethics, phenomenology, public sphere studies, public relations, and others, but not linguistics. We believe it will be insightful to look at some of the normative theories of language: how they define “dialogue”, communication, two-way communication, and other phenomena investigated in public relations research, and compare it with M. L. Kent and A. Lane’s perspective on that subject. We consider it a legitimate analysis because at the core of all communication disciplines,

including PR, strategic communication, and organization studies lies language, and what people do with it.

Looking at the media examined in the reviewed research, we see that out of the twenty studies seventeen examined texts, i.e. social media posts, tweets, Facebook messages, surveys, and other kinds of texts. Thus, this review could bring more clarity into our understanding of communication in general, dialogue in particular, and begin to change our perception of language as an instrument or conduit to communication as exchange of ideas.

The concept of dialogue

Reflections on the causes and purposes of human interaction with the environment come to the fore in the studies of the third generation of cognitive research.

Studies conducted within this framework are interdisciplinary, the bibliography is extensive [3; 4; 11; 12; 17; 19]. The adaptation of a person as a biological species through language activity is the foundation of biocognitive theory. Men and society are considered as living self-organizing systems [14], the unity of which is created by the relational area of the language where the “system of behavior of human society” unfolds [11], both community and its individuals are co-determined in language and through language [9, p. 150]. Language is viewed as an interpersonal activity far from a stable system of symbols.

One of the main assumptions of biocognitive theory of language that will be relevant to our discussion is that speech and writing are different phenomena. Oral communication or speech is a type of cognitive human activity (with specific biological function) of interactive nature. Writing (or domain of written texts) is a different type of linguistic environment [9, p. 150]. According to M. Donald, the main function of the written language is to be a system of storage and retrieval of information, which allows people to accumulate experience and knowledge, and the second function of the written text is orienting [5, p. 309].

In general terms, for communication to be considered “dialogue” or dialogic it should be a linguistic behavior or use of natural language between two or more people in a consensual domain. The former accounts the physical context and prosodic features (gestures, facial expressions, looks, etc.) integrated into the complex dynamics of oral communication [9, p. 150]. As for two-way communication, it is more precise to use the term two-way written communication. The former is applied to all cases of communication where written texts are used: tweets, posts on Facebook, threaded discussions on forums, posts on other social media platforms and apps, surveys, and others.

To deeper understand the dynamics of oral communication, it is helpful to explore some basic propositions. First, meaning is experiential. It implies that humans construct the meaning from their interactions with physical, biological, social, and cultural aspects of the environment. Since the experience of two people cannot be identical due two variability of their interactions, they will not have identical meanings associated with the same phenomenon / object [18, p. 4]. Thus, a question arises, how understanding happens in oral communication if each of the speakers has unique associations as a result of individual experiences. The answer, according to A. V. Kravchenko, is that our understanding of another person in the consensual domain (natural language interaction) depends on the degree to which our personal experience overlaps with similar experience of others [9].

People look for common experiential ground in interpreting linguistic behavior of others. The more the overlap between experiences of speakers is, the higher the potential of their understanding each other. Thus, the main assumption of oral communication: it is not coding and decoding and it is not exchange of ideas, it is about linguistic interaction in a consensual domain when linguistic signs trigger certain associations in the minds of the speakers. When people have similar experiences, they will have similar associations that will facilitate understanding in the course of interaction.

Biocognitive linguistic approach gives us a different look and helps understand better the phenomenon we study, i.e. linguistic (mediated) communication [6; 10; 12; 13; 16].

Going back to the definition of “dialogue”, understood as primarily a linguistic interaction between two or more people in the consensual domain (oral communication), the genuine dialogue can be described as follows. First, as M. Kent and A. Lane [7] highlighted, it is experiential phenomena, which is line with biocognitive perspective of the language. It is about interaction between observers (people) in a shared physical context. The key principles of dialogue, identified by M. Kent [8], all imply shared physical context, meaning face-to-face interaction — an ideal form of dialogue. Dialogue involves a communicative give and take between two or more individuals who positively regard each other and their communication [7, p. 3]. According to M. Kent and A. Lane [7], dialogue is a communication practice that values trust, truth, understanding, and other factors. As A. Kravchenko [9] pointed out, understanding in the consensual domain is possible only if there are overlapping personal experiences. We believe the former may facilitate trust, empathy, mutuality, and other aspects as similar experiences help people interpret linguistic behavior of others. It is important to consider that, according to the biocognitive approach, people interact with each other in real time and space only in the case of oral communication, personal or mediated [9, p. 144]. In written communication there is, in fact, no such interaction [9, p. 144]. Thus, technically, it could not be considered dialogic. Based on this assumption, the majority of the dialogue studies, reviewed by M. Kent and A. Lane [7], examined so-called written two-way communication (tweets, social media texts, posts, Facebook messages, etc.) and not dialogue.

In 1923, Buber defined ideal dialogue as interpersonal, face-to-face situations, which, from our perception, implies oral communication in a consensual domain [1]. Though Buber does not mention language in his discussion, we believe that the core concept in his perception of dialogue is linguistic interaction in a common physical domain where people can see and hear each other. D. Bohm [2] points out that some group contexts have dialogic potential, as they do imply shared physical context and linguistic interaction, although, as M. Kent and A. Lane [7] argue, it does not guarantee that people will engage in substantive interpersonal dialogue. Drawing on biocognitive approach we can attempt to explain it as follows: people may not understand each other because they lack similar personal experiences as language users.

M. Kent and A. Lane [7] discuss different group contexts that may include close friends/colleagues or complete strangers. According to the biocognitive approach, the main difference between those people could be the degree to which personal experiences of those people overlap. In the case of close friends and colleagues, the overlap can be quite substantial which will facilitate mutual understanding. In the case of complete strangers – not so much. It could be hypothesized that the lack of similar experiences could make people trust less, be uncooperative, not be able to empathize with others, not

have commitment, or have psychological readiness. Thus, as M. L. Kent and A. Lane [7] argue, group interaction in a shared physical domain, which is in our perspective, oral communication in a group setting, has all the prerequisites for dialogue, which may not necessarily rise to the level of genuine dialogue [7, p. 5].

Based on biocognitive approach to language as a type of cognitive human behavior, only the cases of oral linguistic interaction may have features of genuine dialogue. As M. L. Kent and A. Lane noted, “dialogue is rooted in lived experience [7, p. 6], which is interaction between people in different contexts (family, friends, colleagues, etc.) or in a consensual linguistic domain. Dialogue produces insights, and understanding of, oneself and others (ontological) [7, p. 6], which implies looking out for similar personal experiences [9, p. 150], that will help us understand each other better.

As for the social media texts, tweets, Facebook posts and other kinds of texts, they are considered as so-called written communication. In the case of social media platforms there are different features that allow for facilitation of oral linguistic interaction (chats, virtual meetings, group calls, etc.), which have various degree of having potential for dialogic interaction [7].

In conclusion, we would like to ponder on the question that has not been addressed yet: why humans communicate (in speech or in writing), at personal or social levels, face-to-face or through media platforms. At the core of this question is the essence of human language. What is it for? What do people do with it? M. Kent and A. Lane suggest that dialogue is not a tool to influence others; it is a tool for understanding [7, p. 6]. However, what does it mean, can you influence somebody without understanding them first? Participation in a debate or negotiation, even with pre-determined goal, does not imply that your opinion on the situation cannot change, you may even accept a point of view of your opponents. Oral linguistic communication is multifaceted and rather complex.

Biocognitive approach offers us a different view on the function of language. In 1945, Charles Morris was the first one to suggest that language for humans is a continuation of our senses, which functions to orient us in the environment. The process of taking account of more remote environment is continued in the complex process of semiosis made possible by language. According to C. Morris [15], the object taken into account no longer needs to be perceptually present. Why do we need to orient others and ourselves? The answer is to adapt to the ever changing environment, so we could survive as species. The function of human communication (speech or in writing) can be perceived as orientational. So what traditional approach to language identifies as various goals of communication, i.e. to inform, to persuade, to exchange ideas, to establish contact, to understand each other (with what purpose?) and others fall under this term — orientational function. For example, when an airport posts flight cancellation on its social media it is not simply informing the public; but rather orienting them — so they do not come to the airport but change their plans accordingly. When a customer posts on social media that a device is faulty and dangerous to use, it is not just to inform the followers and the company itself about the problem, but rather to orient others to be careful as there is a faulty function, and as for organization — to orient it in such a way that it addresses the problem. When we say that we understand each other, or in M. Kent and A. Lane’s [7] term — participate in dialogic communication, within the biocognitive approach, we co-orient each other after establishing common ground and adjust our own behaviors accordingly.

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The article was submitted 21.11.2024; approved after reviewing 26.12.2024; accepted for publication 11.02.2025.

ТЕОРИИ ДИАЛОГА В АСПЕКТЕ КОГНИТИВНОГО ПОДХОДА К ЯЗЫКУ

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Аннотация. В настоящем исследовательском эссе рассматриваются вопросы, поднятые М. Кентом и А. Лейн в их анализе исследований по связям с общественностью, посвященных применению теории диалога. Авторы подчеркнули, что диалог как феномен исследовался в различных научных дисциплинах, включая философию, психологию, этику, феноменологию, исследования публичной сферы, связи с общественностью и другие. Ученые считают, что диалог в значительной степени возник для открытия истины, а некоторые его характеристики могут присутствовать в различных формах коммуникации. Автор предлагает использовать исследовательский подход биологии познания, используемый в лингвистике для изучения этого феномена. На наш взгляд, такой подход может быть полезен для исследований в области связей с общественностью, поскольку в основе всех коммуникативных дисциплин, включая стратегические коммуникации, PR и организационные исследования, лежит язык и то, что люди с ним делают.

Ключевые слова: биология познания, когнитивная лингвистика, теория диалога, опосредованная коммуникация, связи с общественностью.

Для цитирования

Рыбалко С. А. Теории диалога в аспекте когнитивного подхода к языку // Вестник Бурятского государственного университета. Филология. 2025. Вып. 1. С. 39–44.

Статья поступила в редакцию 21.11.2024; одобрена после рецензирования 26.12.2024; принята к публикации 11.02.2025.