

SCIENTIFIC REVIEWS. OPINIONS

DOI: 10.15838/esc.2018.2.56.15

© Guzhavina T.A.

How Meanings Are Studied

A Review of the Monograph: Adam'yants T.Z. *Social Meanings of Global Processes and Changes: Mechanisms and Catalysts.*

Moscow: RAS Institute of Sociology, 2017. 69 p.



Tat'yana A. GUZHAVINA

Vologda Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences
Vologda, Russian Federation, 56A, Gorky Street, 160014
E-mail: tanja_gta@mail.ru

The reviewed monograph draws the readers' attention to the communicative and cognitive sphere of the society whose importance, in the author's opinion, is underestimated. The research was performed at Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and recommended for publication by Academic Council of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The main purpose for the research is to demonstrate the relations between the meanings, the "world views" of millions of people and global processes and changes circulating in the socio-cultural space.

The communicative and cognitive sphere of the society is characterized by the formation of

social meanings or latent motivational-target constructs. It ensures the existing features of communication interactions between countries, societies, organizations, cultures, communities, and groups. As the author notes, the nature of social meanings is twofold. On the one hand, they are a virtual product of people's consciousness, the result of a complex set of their mental-figurative-emotional processes and reactions, on the other hand; thanks to social communication, they can be transmitted through signs, manifested on the material level.

Why did meanings become the object of the author's attention? We find the answer to this

For citation: Guzhavina T.A. How meanings are studied (a review of the monograph: Adam'yants T.Z. "Social meanings of global processes and changes: mechanisms and catalysts". Moscow: RAS Institute of Sociology, 2017. 69 p.). *Economic and Social Changes: Facts, Trends, Forecast*, 2018, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 225-230. DOI: 10.15838/esc.2018.2.56.15

question in the author's work, who emphasizes that the current era is not only the era of information, but also the era of meaning. Meanings appear as an attribute of the human environment. If information is a means to convey the meanings, the meanings themselves fill the "worldview" of millions of people. This gives rise to their special role in society. However, it is not the meanings themselves that attracted the author's attention, but their role in the communication space. The point is that meanings are connected with the manipulation with people's consciousness, with changes in the socio-cultural space, with the practical activities of a human in material and political spheres. According to the author, it is not enough to analyze only the content of an information flow for a deep understanding of social processes. It is important to look for latent causes of consistency or, on the contrary, inconsistency between real processes and circulating meanings. It is important to find the answer to the question: Do they occur according to the "stimulus-reaction" principle, and if not, what meaning message is the most significant and what groups it is focused on, including groups differentiated by the peculiarities of understanding?

The author begins with the disclosure of scientific ideas about the category of "meaning" and about the understanding of the meaning. The reader is consistently introduced to the approaches and ideas about meanings existing in the scientific discourse. Thus, the concept of "meaning" is central to *Verstehen* sociology (M. Weber), symbolic interactionism (G. Mead, H. Blumer, H. Cooley), phenomenology (E. Husserl and A. Sch tz, T. Luckmann and P. Berger), ethnomethodology (H. Garfinkel, H. Sacks), cultural sociology (J. Alexander), semio-social psychology (T. M. Dridze) and a number of other concepts. As a result, the author

brings us to her conceptual interpretation of the meaning as a holistic, complete communicative act, declares her solidarity with the dialogical (semiosociopsychological) concept of social communication (Dridze), since it is here that the subject of understanding is characterized as objective and specific: it is necessary to understand the author's intentionality as a qualitative feature of any integral complete communicative acts.

The identification of the author's intention indicates the problem of adequate perception of meanings inherent in a communication act, which causes the author's anxiety about people's ability to adequately understand the meanings of perceived works due to their natural gift.

The development level of communication skills is an integral characteristic of the degree of respondent's understanding of intentionality (semantic dominants) of perceived works. In order to identify the level of understanding semantic dominants, the author introduces the method of intentional analysis of a communication processes. The application of the method is based on distinguishing the structure of a completed communication act. The author gives a typical motivational and target structure of a communicative act, highlighting six levels. This model has been successfully tested in the study of communicative acts of different origin and symbolic (semiotic) embodiment: mass media materials, painting, teaching materials, poetry and prose, various kinds of regulation acts, in the study of image, etc. The procedure for the application of the method, consisting of several stages is also described.

The use of the method of motivational-target analysis also helps give a proof-of-concept definition of the quality of respondent's understanding of the author's intentionality

(meaning) of perceived works, which is the basis for differentiation by level of development of communication skills, or socio-mental groups. As it turned out, the revealed level of communication skills acts as an integral characteristic of the respondent's understanding of intentionality (semantic dominants) of perceived works. This characteristic, according to the author, was significant not only for understanding the features of human interaction with traditional types and forms of communication, but also with all other socially significant areas which cannot exist without communication. This characteristic become a universal "adapter" which helps bridge the gap between communication processes of different degrees of complexity.

Having provided the insight into theoretical and methodological aspects, the author draws attention to the use of meaning-creation technology in modern infowars. The author moves away from the narrow interpretation of the concept of "infowar" as a confrontation in the sphere of information; she seeks to identify deeper semantic confrontation and semantic attacks unfolding in the sphere of information, and show their direction. For this purpose, the author analyzes typical manipulative mechanisms of meaning creation used in information wars.

So what are the highlighted mechanisms? There are several. The ones most often used are "mental traps". They are aimed at transforming the original meaning of sustainable concepts. This applies, for example, to a "family" in a non-traditional marriage. The same happens to the content of semantic constructs such as honor, conscience, justice, meaning of life, etc. Here there is a shift of one semantic contour to another. But the proposal to develop a new concept for the new sense often faces aggressive denial.

Another mechanism is "semantic missiles" intended to have a strong emotional impact on the audience. The "missile" is aimed to encourage negative traits of human nature: hatred, envy, greed, etc. For example, the people of Ukraine were and are being exposed to effects of these "missiles" with the aim, as the author notes, to form a hostile attitude towards the Russian people, to lay the deep foundations of division. A striking example of such a "missile" is "Holodomor" in Ukraine. Or, for example, the intention "everything is bad", which awakens anxiety and distrust. This especially relates to those who are not capable of adequately understand manipulative mechanisms. The extreme form of this intention is rough economic pressure, sanctions, which, however, according to data of major sociological centers about the Russians' attitude to the government, caused a reaction opposite of the one the manipulators expected.

But the most acute confrontation between true and false intentions is manifested in multi-way propaganda campaigns, which are a complex mechanism of influence. The civil motives are used: the struggle against injustice, exposure, etc. During extensive discussions either outdated information, or inaccurate data, or emotional or distorted illustrations of events which did not happen are used.

The proposed method of motivational and target analysis helps both identify the typical intentional structure of the propaganda campaign, and "daylight" implicit, hidden methods of manipulation technology. It is about the possibility of making visible egotistic aggressive intentions hindering the general humanitarian orientation of global processes and changes.

The author's idea about the support for manipulation technology in meaning creation from various humanities, including in our

country, is also of interest. Here, the author critically examines the role of postmodern and hermeneutic concepts. These concepts are designated as modern as opposed to traditional, outdated ones. Their goal is to postulate the existence of plurality of meanings. Moreover, they proclaim “the death of the author”. They argue that the meaning arises not in the process of creating work, but primarily in the process of its “consumption”. The author sees the origins of this approach in the “linguistic turn” which gave special importance to the language. The proponents of this direction are poststructuralists and deconstructionists, directing the reader to search for meanings in the fragmented tissue of the text, to analyze individual phrases, lead to the recognition of a new meaning with each new reading. As a result – reject the methods of traditional literary criticism, where the explanation of meaning was associated with the author’s personality.

The monograph clearly states the author’s position of protest against the promotion by these concepts of arbitrary interpretation of canonical texts or historic events, ascribing them new meanings, etc. This means communication, understanding and interaction become impossible. The danger noted by the researcher also lies in the fact that polydiscursivity spread through unlimited opportunities of arbitrary interpretation leads to the depreciation of mental skills of deep understanding. A disregard for universal values also takes place.

The second chapter of the monograph draws the reader’s attention to the communication models existing in science. These models describe the communication mechanisms used for the interaction between the communicator and the audience. Such models not only explain how the formation and translation of meanings goes on, but also are the meanings themselves.

And some of them turn global because they become “gold standard”.

The author analyzes the most common models of communication, their impact on real processes, on people’s “world views”. The analyzed models are: H.D. Lasswell linear model, T. Newcomb interactionist model, T.M. Dridze dialogical model, B. Pierce and V. Cronen model of coordinated management of meaning. As a result, weak and strong points of these models were identified, and the author’s position was indicated. In contrast to the idea of multiple meanings in most presented models, the author proposes semiosociopsychological concept of social communication by T. Dridze developed in the framework of the Russian academic science and postulating the constancy of meaning as a property of a holistic, complete communicative act. This concept has become the theoretical and methodological framework for further research.

The third chapter of the monograph *Social Meanings of Global Processes and Changes: Mechanisms and Catalysts* gives us the idea of the empirical framework of the work. You might think how is the study of mentality of different population groups connected to the global nature of the modern world? However, the connection here is not only direct, but also has a practical basis. The fact is that in today’s globalizing world, the ability to adequately navigate the socio-cultural environment, understand the mechanisms of manipulation technology and methods used by the communicator become more important than ever.

The understanding of effects and results of communication technology has been achieved largely due to the study. Its peculiarity is the use of another method of audience differentiation, except for traditional ones (gender, age, standard of living, hobbies, etc.), the new

criteria include communication skills or the ability to understand other people.

Depending on the degree of understanding of purposes and motives (intentionality) of the perceived text, interpretations can be classified as adequate, partially adequate and inadequate. Hence the possibility of differentiating people by understanding and interpretation skills. Each group demonstrated its own characteristics of perception and exposure to manipulation technology.

The studies have shown very interesting results in all groups. Their representatives demonstrated the understanding of which side of the conflict is reflected in the text under analysis. It was found that negative semantic messages, even those that required huge funds and efforts from their creators, when reaching a certain level of the inconsistency barrier, gave the effect opposite to the one expected. Real-world effects turned out to be the factor generating a reverse response. The author notes that in these cases not only a “cognitive dissonance”, but also an emotional-volitional consensus took place, designated by L.N. Tolstoy as “popular thought”. The examples are election results in the US, the UK Brexit, and the intention “everything is bad” constantly injected into the Russian socio-cultural space. Apparently, if we continue the author’s idea, other examples can be listed: the doping scandal in the Russian sports community which culminated in the country’s being banned from the 2018 Winter Olympics, etc.

According to the author, in some other county, perhaps, such pressure would have the intended effect. However, it is claimed that this is impossible in Russia. The reason lies in the features of the national character, which, as shows experience, are dormant and wake up at special moments. They are freedom, internal sense of justice, ability to sacrifice, desire

and ability to protect, if necessary, one’s land and country’s sovereignty. In opposition to the manipulative influence, a significant role belongs to response socio-cultural processes which were reflected in the speeches and materials of journalists, politicians, public figures, and government representatives.

According to the research data obtained with the use of semiosociopsychological methods and approaches, such understanding was demonstrated by the representatives of all socio-mental groups. The author points out that this fact is essential as it largely helps limit the spread of ideas that in the Russian society the President is supported only by the representatives of the lower classes of the population. The results of the study among students and young specialists were an a good illustration.

But how does one prepare an individual able to adequately perceive the meanings coming to him from the surrounding reality? This problem is covered in the 4th chapter of the work. The author’s historical remark draws attention to the fact that this problem has been raised more than once in the history of mankind. More than once attempts to find its solution were unsuccessful.

In modern conditions, the progress of the mankind is associated with mass development of the quality of consciousness of our contemporaries, which is facilitated by modern science technology, the development of people’s new mental abilities leading to personality development, including its moral and spiritual aspects.

However, according to the author on the basis of research data presented in the monograph, a significant share of people are not capable of deep multi-level perception of meanings, and the models of communicative interactions common in the socio-cultural

environment and formed on the basis of hermeneutic concepts, do not solve this problem. The established communication models in the educational system are focused on linear perception. This leads to the inability to adequately understand the author, interlocutor, teacher, commentator, to the inability to separate the truth from fiction or unfounded fantasies. Such people are normally “easy prey” for manipulators, whether in politics, mass culture or advertising.

As a sociologist, a scholar, the author draws the reader’s attention to the importance of results obtained by specialists for both scientific work and their public presentation to the audience. Based on the research construct such as observation, the author gives a number of examples of inadequate use of scientific research data or appeal to pseudoscientific data, which is difficult to recognize as reliable. Such observations lead the author to the idea that the reliability of applied data is extremely important in case of infowars and “double standards”. Both scientific data and estimated judgments of carriers of such information are semantic constructs. It is important that reliable, verified and objective research data, not distorted by personal tastes, preferences and expectations, circulate in the socio-cultural environment. The author believes that the scientific opinion, as well as the scientific result, should be honest

and verified at the empirical level – only in this case will semantic constructs produced by scientists and researchers serve as positive processes and changes.

In conclusion, we believe that this research is focused on a prepared reader referred to, according to the author’s classification, to the group of “adequate perceptors”. A deep and interesting research conducted by T.Z. Adam’yants reflects her desire to promote the strengthening of dialogical forms of communication. In our opinion, the research purpose set by the author has been fully achieved.

The structure of the work is distinguished by certain originality. Starting the chapter, the author presents a large text containing meaningful theoretical judgments that precede and largely determine the perception of further sections of the chapter, structured as paragraphs and sub-paragraphs.

In our opinion, it is such works that help the reader who thinks and looks for a deep understanding of communication processes perceive their essential characteristics and understand the internal mechanisms of creation and distribution of meanings filling the world around us. In turn, this knowledge really contributes to a deep understanding of intentionality of both research subject and the author’s own intentions.

Information about the Author

Tat’yana A. Guzhavina – Candidate of Sciences (Philosophy), Associate Professor, Leading Researcher, Vologda Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences (56A, Gorky Street, Vologda, 160014, Russian Federation; e-mail: tanja_gta@mail.ru)

Received December 18, 2017.