Seismo

Sophie Lambolez. *«Dites donc il fonctionne pas ce machin.» Regard sur le support informatique.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016, pp. 198. With a preface by Alain Trognon and Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont. ISBN 978-2-343-09716-9

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This volume, appeared for the book series «Figures de l'interaction» (figures of interaction) published by L'Harmattan, deals with communication processes within a technical professional domain: Namely, remote troubleshooting and maintenance support (in French, "dépannage informatique à distance") in the field of informatics. The author, Sophie Lambolez, is currently a lecturer at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

It goes without saying that, due to an increasing interaction with complex machines in our personal and professional life, the existence of services devoted to remote support is increasingly important. And so is the study of how communication between experts and users can be co-constructed in an effective way within these processes. Rapidly developing technological changes often bring new communicative processes with them; it is important to reflect on these processes in order to interpret and improve them. Lambolez's volumes takes this challenge seriously. For this reason, the book will not only be of use to scholars interested in the dynamics of communication in a professional domain; it will also offer a tool to practitioners and managers whose companies offer this kind of service and who are interested in reflecting on their organizational practices at the level of communication. Lambolez's writing style consistently addresses both readerships.

The volume is opened by an introduction on remote troubleshooting and maintenance support (chapter 1) and by a description of the two companies (one in France, one in Switzerland) in which Lambolez had the opportunity to work

(chapter 2). She could observe how communication develops in this kind of professional activity from an internal, quasi-anthropological perspective. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the theoretical perspective adopted by the author for her analysis of the expert-client interaction; different approaches are discussed in a clear and well-thought style. The last two chapters of this book, namely 5 and 6, represent the core of the analysis. In particular, chapter 5 analyses communication between experts and clients; the author reconstructs a "script" that includes the sequences that are normally present in the development of this kind of interaction, whilst signalling the most specific features of each sequence. Chapter 6 goes back to remote troubleshooting and maintenance support as a new professional activity and gives some advice that will be useful for the recruitment, training and continuing education of these specialists in the field of communication.

Among the many aspects that are interesting in this volume, I would like to focus on some that appear particularly relevant for communication studies. In fact, although being focused on a very specific context, this work does not refrain from reflection on theoretical concepts that are of broader interest.

First, Lambolez goes beyond the idea of remote support as an event based on the simple flow of information from expert to client and vice versa. She develops a rich notion of *interaction* between human beings and introduces the concept of "double-activity interaction", which refers to the two activities that must be simultaneously managed in this type of conversation: An

expert must be able not only to solve the problem technically (asking questions, proposing actions to be performed, etc.) but also to manage communicative dialogue in a collaborative way in order for the interaction to be successful. In this relation, Lambolez observes that technical competences (on software applications and remote support) can be only be put in place if communication is managed at the level of "relational skills". In my view, these skills concern the construction of a space for interaction and communication, the building of trust and the resolution of possible conflicts (this latter is an aspect that Lambolez briefly touches upon).

Second, interaction analysis in this work is based on a careful consideration of theoretical accounts that inherit both from social psychology and from linguistics (such as for example Trognon, 1999; Trognon & Bromberg, 2006). Such interdisciplinary background appears particularly promising for a better understanding of communication at a fine level of granularity; however, in this volume, some of the linguistic or discursive aspects – e.g. how the lack of non-verbal cues in phone conversations is compensated within verbal communication – are discussed only briefly. Pursuing this line of research by going further in the integration of interdisciplinary contributions could be a future development and an important step towards understanding this type of interaction.

Third, an aspect that stands out in Lambolez's analysis is the communicative *co-construction* of the problem to be solved, about which expert and client hold different but complementary knowledge (see p. 128 and p. 143). The technical problem, in fact, is not known to the expert – and is often not fully understood by the client! – at the beginning of their phone conversation. Clients might see their machine blocked without having a clue about the reasons why it is so; experts might think of a series of possible causes but they do not physically see the problem and, thus, they need to ask their clients to "see" through their eyes. A first type of communicative work that client and expert can only do together is to construct

and share a "common ground", largely factual, on whose basis they can build their interaction. Due to the relevance of the co-construction of knowledge in this phase of this interaction, which Lambolez neatly identifies and describes, it would be interesting to reinterpret and further discuss this kind of professional activity by interpreting it as a *communicative activity type* of *problem-solving* (see for example van Eemeren, 2010).

Beyond these and other interesting theoretical suggestions, this book also gives practical insights on the remote troubleshooting and maintenance support as a new profession, in which communication plays an important role. Notably, this represents a research project that already brought about a follow-up at the practical level, as both companies that were the object of this study equally benefited from the author's observations to reinterpret and restructure their work in this area. Going back to one of the two companies after some time, the author has herself noted how communication in this area had been reorganized.

Nothing could make a better ending for this review than a provoking open question proposed by the author herself at the end of her work. Lambolez makes a connection between the crucial "relational skills" required for this kind of work and the skills that would be expected of a teacher in an educational context. She suggests that educational dialogue could be profitably reinterpreted, if one took the relational skills into account, which are able to open and sustain a space for communication. This suggestion might be extended to any activity of problem-solving, in which a cooperative co-construction of knowledge is needed in order for the interaction to proceed.

References

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