

## TOWARDS AN EMPIRICAL PRAGMATICS

### Some social psychological conditions of speech acts

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#### *1. Introductory summary*

Pragmatics has hitherto been mainly a philosophical and a linguistic enterprise. Speech acts are accounted for in relatively abstract action theoretical terms. The actual production, comprehension and effects of speech acts in communication, however, should also be studied in a more empirical perspective. Cognitive models should be elaborated to account for planning, comprehension and memory of speech acts. Similarly, a great number of social psychological factors which determine the success of speech acts in 'real' situations require our attention. That is, besides illocution, we now also should pay attention to perlocution, and to the conditions which make hearers actually accept a specific speech act.

On the basis of some recent work on discourse comprehension and its extension to cognitive speech act models, this paper will briefly discuss some of these social psychological factors of pragmatics. Both from a linguistic and from a philosophical point of view, this interdisciplinary area is rather unexplored, so our remarks are tentative and informal. Also, experimental work will be necessary to find out about the many details and problems of such a complex model of pragmatic information processing.

#### *2. The need for an empirical pragmatics*

The philosophical and linguistic theory of speech acts, one of the central tasks of pragmatics, has been concerned with a rather abstract account of the illocutionary aspects of language use. Appro-

priateness conditions for speech acts, relative to pragmatic contexts, are usually formulated in terms of wants, preferences, knowledge, beliefs or evaluations of speakers and hearers. Such conditions are abstractions from the actual communicative situation : how speakers and hearers go about planning, executing, understanding, storing in memory, accepting and, in general, 'changing their minds' relative to speech acts, are topics which are usually neglected, or left to psycho- and sociolinguistics. In other words, pragmatics has been developing much in the same way as abstract syntax and semantics did. Of course, as an initial strategy of research this is no problem. On the contrary, such abstractions will often yield very satisfactory and 'neat' theories. Although still far from perfect, speech act theory of the last ten years is an example in case of such a success for more abstract theorizing. In particular, the influence of the philosophy and logic of action played an important role in this advance in the theory of language. Moreover, dealing with action and language 'in context' at least seemed to bring us closer to an account of 'language use'.

It is clear however that this cannot be the full picture. Just as we need cognitive and social models for (the use of) grammar, we also need a more empirical basis for the theory of speech acts. Since linguistic theory also should account, within an interdisciplinary collaboration with psychology and sociology, for the 'actual' processes of language use, e.g. those (planning, etc.) mentioned above, we need both a model of pragmatic cognition, and a model of the social functioning of speech acts. Also, we need a 'bridge' between these two empirical models, viz. a social psychological model. Such a model must account for the ways individual language users handle speech acts in the social context. For instance, such language users will have beliefs about each other, about the interaction going on, and at the same time about the possible strategies for an utterance to effectively 'influence' the other language user, e.g. in conversation. Similarly, a hearer will not simply 'believe' the assertion, follow the command or accept the congratulations of a speaker : in order for his mind and his actions to change according to the purposes of the speaker a great number of social psychological conditions must be satisfied. A speaker must have a certain credibility, authority, personality, etc. The speech act itself must exhibit marks of politeness, friendliness, authority, submissiveness, and so on. And finally, the hearer himself must be in a particular cognitive and emotional state in order to accept a speech act, and act according to it. The interaction of these factors is extremely difficult

to model in an adequate and testable empirical model. No wonder, therefore, that so little work in this fuzzy, vast and complex area has been done. In this paper we can hardly have the pretention to clear up the domain. We only can formulate some questions for further research and mention some of the factors involved.

### *3. The cognitive model of speech acts*

Pragmatic information processing is probably not fundamentally different from semantic information processing as it is studied in current cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence. In both cases, language users manipulate and organize conceptual structures derived from interpretations of 'utterances', and interpretations of 'situations'. The cognitive model of semantic production and comprehension — of sentences or texts — involves the construction of proposition sequences, which are connected in Short Term Memory and then (after a cyclical process of admitting new information to and removing old information from the buffer of STM) hierarchically stored in Long Term Memory. Effective retrieval of semantic information from LTM, either during comprehension of the discourse or during (re-)production, requires that the information be intelligently organized. So, the propositional sequence is not only linearly connected, e.g. by conditional and functional links, but also at a more global, over-all level, that is by semantic macrostructures ('themes', 'topics') and schematic superstructures (e.g. narrative or argumentative schemata). All these local and global processing and storing procedures heavily rely on world knowledge, as it is organized in scripts or frames. Understanding a story about a trip by plane thus requires a vast socio-cultural knowledge about the stereotypical ways people normally take airplanes, about the paraphernalia of airports, and so on. This allows discourses to be rather implicit and incomplete on many points, emphasizing what is really new, unexpected, unknown, atypical or interesting. It should be added that a hearer, in order to understand the meaning and reference of an utterance, at the same time needs to perceive and interpret the referential context (present objects, individuals, properties, relations, facts), and connect this interpretation with his interpretation of the utterance. How a hearer does this is unknown: I wouldn't know of any cognitive model which accounts for both kinds of interpretation at the same time and in an integrated, interactive way.

This last remark is not just a hint for further cognitive research, but at the same time points to an important component in a satisfactory model of *pragmatic* processing. Obviously, planning and understanding speech acts cannot just take place at the level of the various structures (surface and semantic) of the utterance. Appropriateness at least requires that both the speaker and the hearer have a good model of the (pragmatic) context. Thus, the speaker must have plausible or justified beliefs about the actual knowledge, wishes, wants, preferences, actions and future actions of the hearer. Otherwise, an assertion, a promise, a request, an order or an accusation would be pointless. The same for the beliefs of the hearer : he would be unable to even understand the pragmatic purposes and intentions of the speaker if he would not make assumptions, even tentative, about the knowledge, wishes, etc. of the speaker. Similarly, both will need to know what social relations, roles or institutional features are involved, otherwise a request might be misguided, a command rather an insult, or an arrest just a joke. In other words, the language users must make a systematic analysis of *both* the utterance (at all levels) *and* the *relevant* cognitive and social contexts — which we have called the pragmatic context earlier. Again, no cognitive model is available at present which does that job. In comparison to the semantic model, we may just speculate about possible pragmatic representations in memory and the processes involved in constructing or retrieving them. Thus, it is a fair guess that propositional sequences, on the basis of further surface structure information (e.g. intonation, stress, word order, particles — as well as paratextual aspects), and on the basis of world knowledge, will be further interpreted in terms of speech act concepts, given the appropriate information from the communicative context. Sequences of speech act concepts will also be locally and globally organized and make up coherent speech act representations in memory. Macro-speech acts will in that case again occupy the top levels of the pragmatic memory tree : a lecture, a letter, a piece of conversation, etc. may indeed globally function as an over-all assertion, request, threat, advice or accusation, and in that way organize and monitor the planning and understanding of the local speech acts, as well as their retrieval.

So much (in fact : so little) for the cognitive basis of our empirical model of speech act processing. It needs no further emphasis that we are just beginning to grasp what is going on here. But let us continue anyway.

#### 4. *Social psychological factors*

Social psychology, for the outsider, is a hybrid domain, as one might suspect from its very name. On the one hand it deals with problems and phenomena which seem to belong to cognitive psychology, on the other hand it has to do with genuine sociological issues. Of course, the interesting perspectives are precisely the links between these two areas. And at that point, language use, communication and interaction should be localized. Except for good old Saussure and some other linguists (mainly of the British schools : Malinowski, Firth, etc.) the proper empirical place for linguistics was hardly ever within social psychology. Chomsky and his paradigm limited himself to cognitive psychology (at least a rather abstract or speculative brand of it), whereas more recently the 'others' turned to sociolinguistics and sociology. The in-between field was mostly left uncovered. Yet, as soon as we talk about mutual understanding, about communicative interaction, about strategies of persuasion, and so on, we are in the heart of this interdiscipline. Let us spell this out a little bit more in detail for the pragmatic aspects of language use.

Following linguistic usage, we will try to detect the relevant phenomena by giving some thought to a couple of constructed example utterances :

- (1) You son of a bitch !
- (2) Could you come and see me tomorrow at five ?
- (3) I love your beautiful brown eyes.

These sentences, when uttered in a particular situation, can be intended and interpreted as an insult, a request and a compliment, respectively. We will at the moment ignore the fact that they are 'indirect' speech acts ' (1) and (3) being assertions, and (2) a question when taken literally (although we have many problems here).

Abstractly speaking these speech acts are appropriate with respect to a pragmatic context if for each of them a number of conditions are satisfied : S thinks that p and wants H to know that he thinks that p, etc. for (1), S wants H to do p, S assumes that H will not do p on his own initiative, etc. for (2), and the same for (3) as we have for (1), with the difference that p involves a positive qualification of H instead of a negative one. In more realistic terms, this means for a cognitive model that the hearer must make plausible guesses about the relevant beliefs of the speaker, in order for the utterances to be at least understood as an insult, a request and a

compliment respectively. Thus, a statement about a positive quality will allow the inference of a compliment speech act concept, and so on. Similarly, the hearer will need to analyze the context in such a way that he knows that the speaker has a role or status which allows him to make a request (or a command) — otherwise the utterance would at most be appropriate as a ‘begging’.

Needless to say, there is a gap between understanding a speech act correctly on the one hand and *accepting* it on the other hand. And even between accepting a speech act and *acting* upon it (mentally or overtly). Our examples are clear cases in point : an insult will often not be accepted at all, a request only under a number of further conditions, and a compliment can be made only if further constraints are respected. We just cannot go about and make compliments to everybody, in any situation, and even those who may be given a compliment may not be given a compliment on any occasion. So what are these further constraints ?

For the insult, first of all, we may assume that not only a belief of a speaker is involved, but an *opinion*. As we already indicated above, opinions involve evaluations. Due to the rather strange division of labour between cognitive and social psychology, knowledge and beliefs are dealt with in the first branch of psychology, whereas opinions and attitudes are usually the object of investigation in the latter field. In other words, a social psychological model for speech acts should specify how opinions are activated, used, inferred, etc. relative to our speaking. This will require a system of representation for opinions and attitudes, which we lack, even after at least thirty years of active research on them (one of the legacies of behaviorism). We will simply assume here, without further argumentation or details, that opinions are organized in a similar way as knowledge or beliefs, e.g. in scripts or frames, that is in a hierarchical way, where attitudes are the more embracing organizing structures in which opinions, intentions, and biased beliefs about certain socially relevant topic (blacks, the church or linguistics) are inherent components.

Now, back to our example : having an opinion is one thing, but actually expressing it, is quite another thing, especially if the opinion is very negative. There are strong social and cultural constraints on so doing, and if we are allowed to express opinions about others, and especially about our interlocutors, we should do it in a very indirect way in most occasions. Hence (1) can be used

only if further conditions are satisfied. Socially speaking, the hearer must be of at most equal, or rather of lower social status. We do not usually say (1) to the president or to our boss, unless we want to be arrested or fired. Similarly, we would not say (1) even to our equals if we expect further positive cooperation with them, and especially if we want to establish or maintain a favourable attitude of the other about us. So, we do not use (1) to friends, to complete strangers or when we initiate a conversation in which we want to perform the global request of asking for money. And finally, even if we *do* have strong negative opinions, and the conditions are satisfied, we still are not allowed to express (1) in our culture, at least not in this way, unless (1) is a more or less (un-)intentional expression of a strong emotion, like anger or indignation. Again, we here note conditions which usually do not appear in abstract pragmatics, but which of course play a role in real insults. What holds for the production side — does the speaker feel entitled to say/do this? — also holds for the reception side. Understanding an insult, as we said, is far from actually accepting it. Thus, we simply will not accept an insult from equals or inferiors, not from strangers, and in general if the aggressive action is not seriously motivated. So, it may be acceptable (and later forgiven) only if the emotional account can be given: he is angry. In addition, insults seem to be really acceptable only if the hearer believes that he has acted such that the speaker has the right to be very angry, and to show this emotion to him. Only under all these severe restrictions the speech act of an insult may be accepted as such, that is without protest, counter-insult, or request for apology. Note though that this acceptance does not yet entail corresponding cognitive change: the hearer accepting an insult may well understand and accept why a speaker thinks he is a son of a bitch, but not himself *believe* that he is because the speaker says so (the hearer may have other action norms and hence other evaluations). We see that insults have the peculiarity of being hardly ever acceptable. This is understandable when we realize that they will be usually breaking the basic cooperation principles of social communication. They mark conflict, and hence should be viewed in that perspective.

Now, the compliment in example (3) only apparently seems to be the inverse. Surely, compliments will favour interaction and cooperation in many occasions, but on other occasions they may have effects which are quite similar to insults or accusations. If we express (3) to a complete stranger, especially in public places, or if we express (3) to acquaintances with whom we only have a rather

distant or formal relation, and even if we use the compliment for close friends, partners or children, we may well expect negative reactions. Expressing strong positive opinions also requires an appropriate context for close friendly relationships. Well-known is the male chauvinist behaviour of saying (3) during an argument to a female partner when the situation obviously excludes the compliment as irrelevant or as an unacceptable change of topic. This informal description of the possible contexts for compliments again involves a number of important social psychological concepts, such as intimate or friendly relations, positive opinions, an informal, cooperative and emotional interaction context, and so on. Below we will bring some order in these conditions.

Whereas insults and compliments are so to speak pragmatic extremes, requests seem to be more neutral, and acceptable in a broader range of contexts. Yet, again a number of constraints play a role here. A request like (2) cannot simply be addressed to strangers, although a request for the time would be alright in the street. Similarly, the style of the request also is inappropriate for a request among close friends. As for all requests the speaker must assume that the hearer is able and willing to perform the requested action. But that is not all. Status differences may make (2) OK for a director to his employee, but not always vice versa. Again for this example we thus observe that besides the general pragmatic and social psychological conditions, variations in content and style will define their proper contextual conditions. This points to the intricacies of finding general links between semantics, stylistics, pragmatics and social psychological contexts. In order not to complicate matters, we will merely take into account those semantic and stylistic constraints which are general for a given speech act (e.g. positive evaluations in compliments, or questions about future actions in requests).

In order to systematize a little bit the possible social psychological conditions which may be relevant in the account of the actual functioning of speech acts, we now provide a schema with the various main categories of such factors. For each category only some examples of relevant factors are mentioned :

*A. Social cognition*

1. general knowledge and beliefs
2. opinions
3. attitudes

*B. Emotions*

1. Hate
2. love
3. anger



4. norms
5. values

4. anxiety
5. hope

*C. Personality*

1. aggressive
2. friendly
3. dominant
4. submissive
5. (im-)patient
6. authoritarian
7. (in-)tolerant

*D. Interaction types*

1. aggression
2. help, cooperation
3. obstruction
4. formal
5. informal, familiar
6. (im-)patience
7. show affection

*E. Participant categories*

1. role
2. status
3. function
4. power

*F. Context categories/frames*

1. public
2. private
3. strange
4. familiar
5. institutional

Of these various global categories the first two overlap with cognitive psychology and the last two with sociology. We have seen however that they are intricately linked up with the more central social psychological categories such as C. and D.

Now for each speech act factors from each of these categories become relevant for the success of the speech act, i.e. for acceptance and further cognitive change. Let us take a simple example to show this :

(4) Shut up !

This order is acceptable only if the following conditions hold :

- (5) (a) S has the opinion that H talked too much (or not at the right time)
- (b) S is angry
- (c) S is impatient or authoritarian (as a person)
- (d) S is showing impatience (in this act)
- (e) S has higher status, or more power than H
- (f) Context : mostly private, familiar.

Some modifications are possible for this example, depending on the actual context. Thus, in some impatient situations (4) may also

be uttered to equals, and need not always betray anger. Note that (c) and (d) need not always coincide : we may well be impatient at a certain moment without having an impatient personality, and vice versa.

Finally, the social psychological context of speech acts not only has a number of relevant factors, but also its proper 'dynamics'. That is, there are basic cognitive and social principles, conventions, laws or tendencies. The general Cooperation Principle of Grice is just one of them. In the social context we also try to keep faces, defend our ego, keep our cognitive balance, conform to general norms and values, control or deviate our emotions, keep up status, and so on. Some of these general principles will depend on others; maintaining a correct self-interpretation (ego) is vitally important, and so is keeping our cognitive organization in order. These principles, which need not be discussed in detail here (they are in each handbook of social psychology) explain why people will be boasting, insulting, defending, excusing, asking, etc. at all. A compliment, thus, is not only meant to show sympathy, but also an indirect request for getting some sympathy back. And an excuse is a way of restoring a good reputation after having been attributed wrong actions or even a negative point on the personality list, which again may involve infractions of general values and norms.

Interesting from a social psychological point of view are not only these principles but precisely the various interactive *strategies* connected to them. Thus, although we may be very angry, we may ask someone to be quiet in a friendly way, either because we expect a better result, or because we do not want to be seen as authoritarian or because status difference impels us to control our emotions. Similarly, one may have an intolerant attitude about blacks or communists and hide it (because of general norms or values of tolerance) by all kinds of defensive or excusing speech acts. Important in pragmatic interaction in general will be the over-all strategy that the social psychological conditions are closest to those (assumed by the speaker to be) most positively evaluated by the hearer. This is why the authoritarian person will accept orders from those with higher status. The cooperation game, therefore, will, roughly speaking, follow the line of showing positive opinions about H (or things H likes), to show positive affection (smile), to act friendly and helpful, to be modest (not to show higher status or power) and to keep the right level of formality or familiarity. Clearly, in general cooperation games have best results, viz. execution

of pragmatically intended goals, but this does not mean that in many cases the general conflict game should not be acted out : accusations, warnings, insults, etc. will sometimes be emotionally, cognitively or socially necessary. We here neglect, just as above, the vast 'underlying' psycho-analytic factors involved (frustration, etc.).

### 5. Concluding remark

In this brief, informal paper our main point has been to emphasize the need for an empirical basis of pragmatic theory. Besides the usual linguistic and philosophical conditions of a more abstract kind, we need cognitive models for the planning, execution, understanding and memorizing of speech acts, and above all social psychological models which account for the many factors involved in successful and effective speech interaction. On a few examples we have seen that speech acts are not only abstractly appropriate with respect to a pragmatic context, but also acceptable (or not) in a real communicative situation. It will be one of the tasks of such a social psychological model to first spell out the more general conditions on various speech acts, and secondly to specify which variations depend on semantic and stylistic properties of the speech act. Another task is to relate linguistic strategies of discourse and conversation to the basic dynamic principles defining the (changes in the) social psychological context. Some work in social psychology has been done, and the same holds for pragmatic discourse or conversation analysis, but the bridge between linguistics and social psychology is hardly ever crossed. In fact, it is still to be constructed. This paper is only a sketch of one part of that bridge.

### BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Terminology and theory, especially of the first part of this paper, could not be made explicit. For my conceptions and work in the areas of pragmatics, cognitive psychology and discourse studies in general, see e.g.

*Text and Context* (London : Longman, 1977)

*Macrostructures* (Hillsdale, N.J. : Erlbaum, 1980)

*Studies in the Pragmatics of Discourse* (The Hague : Mouton, 1981) and with Walter Kintsch :

"Toward a Model of Discourse Comprehension and Production",

*Psychological Review*, 85 (1978) 363-394.

*Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* (in prep.)

See these studies also for many other relevant references in these areas.

In the field of social psychology I must refer to work of others. Most congenial and relevant to our linguistic and pragmatic approach — and our cognitive bias — are :

W. P. Robinson, *Language and Social Behavior* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972).

E. Stotland & L. K. Canon, *Social Psychology. A Cognitive Approach* (Philadelphia, etc. : Saunders, 1972).

I also feel indebted to some major classics of social psychology, substantially hardly superseded by later work : Festinger (about cognitive dissonance) Allport (about rumors and prejudice) and Hovland and associates (about persuasion) among others.

□ Some of the observations in this paper are based on our empirical work now being done on the role of opinions, attitudes and ethnic prejudice in discourse production and understanding.

□ This paper is a shortened version of a paper in Dutch, "Empirische Pragmatiek", which appear in *Tijdschrift voor Taalbeheersing*, 2, (1980), 1-16.