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ON THE VIOLATION OF SOME CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS

The general frame in which it is best to study the discourse phenomena is the domain of linguistic pragmatics, which, to quote van Dijk (1976)¹, is 'a formal reconstruction of an assumed system of rules enabling a native speaker to relate discourses of a natural language with appropriate contexts'. It is to be remembered, however, that in the present stage of research very few rules have been explicitly formulated. Nor is this paper an attempt to give any such formulations, its aim being merely to examine some types of utterances in relation to principles obtaining in informal discourse.

In any discourse, the talk exchanges of the participants are co-operative efforts: the interlocutors collaborate on a common discourse topic and the exchange goes in some mutually accepted direction. The general principle that the participants of a discourse are expected to observe is the so-called Co-operative Principle. The term was introduced by H. P. Grice (1975)², and the principle itself was formulated as follows:

'Make your conversational contribution such as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.'

Grice then goes on to distinguish four specific conversational maxims:

¹ T. A. van Dijk, *Pragmatics and Poetics*, [in:] *Pragmatics of Language and Literature*, ed. by T. A. van Dijk, Amsterdam 1976.

² P. H. Grice, *Logic and Conversation*, [in:] *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, ed. by P. Cole and J. L. Morgan, New York 1975.

- the maxim of Quality, essentially epistemic and referential, requires that the speaker only says what he thinks is true;

- the maxim of Relation requires that a contribution to the conversation is relevant;

- the Quantity maxim may be expressed as follows: 'Do not give more or less information than is required for the current purpose of the exchange'.

- the maxim of Manner requires the discourse to be perspicuous, i. e. non-ambiguous, non-obscure, brief, etc.

The maxims are not defined in precise terms, which makes them rather vague; however, their vagueness does not imply that they are non-operative or optional. In fact, non-observance of these maxims may be sanctioned as breach of the general Co-operative Principle. Clear intentional violation of the maxims leads to specific interpretations by way of conversational implicatures.

Leaving aside the first two maxims, I would here like to comment on the maxims of Quantity and Manner, and examine some examples of their violation.

To communicate effectively, i. e. to inflict changes in the listener's beliefs, preferences, wishes, etc., the speaker must make assumptions about the amount of information the listener already possesses. Only when he has determined the common field of reference, the speaker is able to choose and encode those aspects of a situation which would exploit maximally the aspects that the listener already shares. He can then express the selected information in a form that the listener will consider appropriate.

In particular, the speaker would make extensive use of syntactic devices such as various reduction and deletion transformations to get rid of the information that he assumes is either in the hearer's general store of knowledge or is available in the interactional setting or in prior discourse. To mention only a few of these anaphoric and deictic devices:

- Pronominalization transformation replaces elements already contextually or textually defined with more condensed forms

- Reflexivization and Relativization transformations obliga-

torily replace the second occurrence of an NP with pro-forms: the sentence:

Paul saw Paul in the mirror.

necessarily entails that two men were involved.

- Equally obligatory is the so-called Equi-NP Deletion, accounting for cases like

Bob wants to stay.

where the embedded occurrence of the complement subject coreferential with the first NP has been deleted.

- As for verbs, English has a pattern of do so, do that/do it substitution, as in

Andy paints landscapes and Marilyn does so, too.

- Other identity deletion rules for verbs include Gapping, exemplified by:

Mick drank whisky, and Chris wine.

- Pro-forms for adverbials include then for time, here/there for place, and thus/so for manner.

Although not all of these syntactic devices are obligatory, cases where information already known to the hearer is verbalized again in detail are extremely rare. The discourse participants try to avoid them as much as possible.

Consider the following situation: I am coming into the classroom, and my eye is caught by an empty seat in the first row of benches. I ask: 'Where's Peter?' The answers I invariably get are: 'He's ill' or 'He will be here in a minute'. or 'He'll be late, because...' It is apparent from the answers that the question is ambiguous. Although on one reading it is a request for information on Peter's whereabouts, on the other reading it is a suggestion that it is a bad thing for Peter not to be where he should be. In the particular situation I have described, the students react to the conveyed rather than to the literal meaning of the question. Answers like 'He's in the library' or 'He's at home', without any further comment, would seem out of place here.

'Where's Peter?' in this context corresponds, then, to 'Why is Peter not here?' If so, however, why have I not made use of the latter form rather than of the former? Puzzled by this, I devised a short test, providing about 50 of my students with

situational contexts and two possible forms of questions. For the context described above, two options were:

- a. Why is Peter not here? and b. Where's Peter?

Yet other contexts and questions:

- A friend is reading something aloud and suddenly stops in the middle of a sentence. Would you ask.

- a. Why have you stopped reading? or b. What's the matter?

- You see your friend in despair, tears running down her cheeks. Would you ask.

- a. Why are you crying? or b. What's happened?

- A visitor comes into the room and hesitates. Would you say

- a. Why are you standing? or b. Won't you sit down?

With these contexts and questions, the markedly greater part of the students (70-90%) were choosing the second option. The results are similar when this test is conducted in Polish. It seems there is a constraint against asking a Why-question verbalizing too much information which is apparent from the situational context.

Answers normally leave out part or all of the presupposing statement that is behind the question. Now, what happens if this general principle is ignored?

I've tested several groups of my students on their perception of the difference in meaning between short answers and 'full' answers to yes/no questions. Obviously, in the classroom situation, short answers were perceived as natural, 'normal', practically devoid of any implication.

My full answer to the question: 'Shall we have a test next week?

- Yes, you shall have a test next week.

was marked as 'acceptable, but strange'. When asked to establish the difference between the full form and the short form, the students produced the following comments: 'The full form means you are really decided this time.' 'You are annoyed with our stupid questions.' 'You are saying: 'Don't be a nuisance.'

If a student in answer to my question: 'Do you want me to repeat this?' produced

- Yes, I want you to repeat this.

it would be perceived by most students as unacceptable in the classroom context. The reasons given were 'He's being rude'.

'He's annoyed with your question and is showing this.' etc. As with the previous test, the results are similar if the test is conducted in Polish.

The general conclusion from this little experiment is that the full reply to a yes/no question is perceived as having different implications from the natural short forms. The full form apparently constitutes a violation of the conversational maxims of Manner and Quantity. The speaker has, as Grice would say, simply 'opted out' from the contextual principles of ordinary conversation. In a conversational situation where statements are meant to inform, one would normally highly rely on anaphoric means of maintaining reference. By using the structure normally characteristic of highly informative utterance (i. e. an utterance containing large amount of new information), the speaker is putting emphasis on nearly every word in his statement. The listener rightly suspects that there must be some purpose to it. In some contexts this may be interpreted by the listener as mimicking his speech, and be therefore insulting. Emphasis also presupposes a degree of self-assurance on the part of the speaker. By encoding his answer in a highly informative structure, the speaker is indirectly suggesting that the person asking the question does not know or understand the obvious facts. This, especially on occasions when the person answering is of lower status than the questioner, may be taken as impolite, to say the least.

To summarize: there is a natural tendency in discourse to reduce redundancy ratio per utterance. In accordance with the general principle of least effort, operating in language as well as in many other forms of human behaviour, a maximum of semantic information should be transmitted in the shortest possible message. Too high degree of redundancy (i.e. high proportion of given information in an utterance), besides leading to the decrease of attention on the part of the hearer, is likely to create the impression that the speaker is underestimating the listener's knowledge or intelligence, which may be taken as insulting.

However, one must not be left with the impression that linguistic redundancy is to be avoided at all costs. The 'unneces-

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sary repetition' may actually have a useful function: when the channel of communication is noisy, the over-use of discourse machinery may be just the right strategy to insure that the hearer knows what is being talked about.

In keeping with the observation that high degree of redundancy leads us to focus our attention on the way of expressing, repetition of words and grammatical structures may have affective power, as in 'You never listen to me! You never pay attention! You never understand!' One could have signified just as much for informative purpose had one said, 'You never listen to me, pay attention or understand.' -but with every apparently unnecessary repetition of the word 'never', more affective connotations are aroused.

Moreover, the structure of the message must roughly follow the basic laws of natural information processing: too much new information without any old information to tie it to (i. e. high relative subjective information ratio) is likely to create misinterpretation, ambiguity or confusion, provoking some sort of clarification requests from the listener, e. g. 'Who?' 'What do you exactly mean?', etc. This is not to say that people are never intentionally obscure and enigmatic, so as to leave their listener in doubt as to their real meaning: consider the speaker who throws around learned words which the listener is not able to sufficiently locate, just in order to create a favourable impression of himself. In this case, the social function of a learned vocabulary becomes more important to its users than its communicative function: some people believe that expressing themselves obscurely would arouse respect and awe among those who do not understand.

As this paper is drawing to a close, let me finally examine some examples where an utterance violates a conversational maxim by being apparently more informative (containing more new information) than required. The question 'Were you at the party last night?' may provoke the answer 'Yes, and Mary was there, too'. This comes from the speaker's assuming, correctly, or not, that the person who asks the question has some other point in asking it than directly expressed.

The answer implies that you know who the questioner is real-

ly interested in. In such cases, you must really be on close terms with your interlocutor and know a lot about him to know his presuppositions.

An instance of the conventionally determined implication occurs in 'Do you know the time?'

'Yes', would be insulting, since you are expected to know the conventional implication of the question and to react accordingly. If you answered, 'Yes, it's half past ten, and the next train leaves at eleven', you would be additionally hinting that you can guess what your interlocutor needs the information about the time for. There are people who do not like others reading their minds in this way, especially when the reading is incorrect - and can become very upset about it!

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O NARUSZANIU NIEKTÓRYCH MAKSYM KONWERSACYJNYCH

W artykule omówiłam bliżej dwie z maksym konwersacyjnych, jakie obowiązują, według P. H. Grice'a, w nieformalnej rozmowie: maksymę Ilości i Sposobu. Przedstawiłam pewną liczbę przykładów wypowiedzi wyraźnie nie przestrzegających tych maksym i wzięłam pod uwagę niektóre możliwe tego konsekwencje. Próbowałam też wyjaśnić mechanizm procesów zachodzących przy pogwałcaniu maksym konwersacyjnych, czyniąc użytek z pojęć takich jak redundancja oraz struktura wypowiedzi pod względem ilości danych i nowych informacji.