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# The Sociolinguistics of Interpersonal Communication

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# The Sociolinguistics of Interpersonal Communication

*working paper*

There is a crisis in social science. Sociologists are at an impasse over the failure of present day theories to provide relevant guides to social activity and to aid in the solutions of problems that trouble human beings in modern urban society. In the attempt to find new ways of redefining the issues, they are turning away from studying the manifest content of activity to a more detailed concern with analyzing the means of communication. The hope is that better models of the human ability to process language may also help us in understanding the basic interaction processes that motivate action in our society. At the same time linguists have become painfully aware of the failure of their own highly refined grammatical formalizations to deal with the problems of meaning in everyday conversation and are turning to sociology for an explanation of social presuppositions in language.

The obvious temptation in such situations is for workers in one discipline to turn to the theoretical writings in the other in the hope of borrowing relevant concepts or analytical techniques. Yet in the present condition this can hardly be satisfactory. Apart from the inevitable cultural lag, the years that must elapse between innovative theorizing, publication and the adoption of ideas in a new field, there is the fact that theory, no matter how sophisticated or internally consistent can have little relevance for problems it was not intended to solve. Neither can a fresh view of the theoretical dilemmas in one discipline automatically be gained by the entry into it of outsiders who have an alternative perspective. The very complexity of modern research paradigms often stands in the way of such an examination. Any individual steeped in the traditions of one discipline who has made a serious effort to learn the techniques of another can attest to the difficulty of distinguishing between technicalities and fundamental concepts in a new field.

There are no advanced text books which communicate across disciplinary boundaries nor readers that focus only on what is «relevant» in recent

research. Because of the pervasiveness of unstated assumptions and the frequent lack of clarity in the definitions of research goals, the process of learning is a laborious one, requiring personal contact with researchers and regular opportunities for feedback. Furthermore, while elegance in analysis continues to be seen as more important in evaluating a theory than guidance of elicitation and data collection, the relevance of theory will continue, most often, to be judged by criteria of internal consistency. Inherent in this position is the danger of a reluctance to seek out inconsistencies resulting from the limited applicability of theoretical concepts. As the biologist, Chamberlin, remarked in the last century, a parental attachment grows up which is a personal attachment to certain viewpoints. The basic scientific paradigm of testing theory deductively, in a post hoc manner, essentially protects the internal consistency of theoretical paradigms. Habermas reflects this view when he argues that as long as theory building is kept separate from the demands and study of practical issues and applied science is considered inferior and less elegant than 'theoretical science', social science will continue to reject the possibilities of taking a critical and self-reflective view of the building and use of theory.

This problem can be seen quite clearly in the development of the new, so called hyphenated, discipline of sociolinguistics. Recent work in sociolinguistics has aroused great interest among social scientists because of its success in analyzing the extraordinary amount of linguistic diversity in human communities. But these achievements were made with particular goals in mind and these were mainly the anthropologists' and the historical linguists' goals of describing the diversity of human cultures and languages, and illustrating process of language change and diffusion and evolution. If some of the results obtained are of interest to the social theorist, it is incidental to the work. Contributing to social theory has not as yet been seen as a primary goal of sociolinguistic analysis. Most of what has been accomplished in sociolinguistics so far has been accomplished by taking over the linguist's view of linguistic structure and examining this in the light of the sociologists definition of social structure. Although criticism of this position is growing, there is as yet no theory which attempts to reconstruct a definition of language or speaking in sociologically relevant terms.

Sociolinguistics, as practiced during the last two decades can be seen as having relevance for two types of issues: *a*) the place of language or speech as a social institution in speech communities or similar population aggregates and *b*) speaking as a mode of interaction, and the speakers use of verbal skills to affect and influence each other through speech. In studies of the former kind the goal is the description of the

linguistic characteristics of entire population aggregates, while studies of the latter kind emphasize the communicating individuals themselves and seek to make explicit the social knowledge that we must assume they possess in order to interact appropriately.

Although there can be little doubt about the validity of the above distinction, and most sociolinguists do accept it, there has been almost no systematic discussion of what it implies for the development of the subject. I would like to argue that the contrast between group or institution oriented studies and speaker oriented studies is a fundamental one, which is more important perhaps than the frequently discussed dichotomies between sign and context or linguistic and extra-linguistic features. It is important because the position one takes with respect to this distinction requires different assumptions about what is 'structural' or 'rule governed' in language, about what aspects of the communication processes are seen as problematic, and therefore, about the kind of speech to be elicited and the sampling procedures are used. The lack of definition of research goals has resulted in a great deal of theoretical confusion, such that elicitation methods and analytical assumption from one kind of study are incorporated in research designs for another and claims are made for one based on the methodology of the other.

By far, the greatest amount of attention has been devoted to problems in the first category. Among the earliest sociolinguistic studies are the studies of language usage or language function which rely on direct or indirect information *about* verbal behavior to examine the factors determining the distribution or usage of particular speech varieties (Whiteley 1971; Fishman, Ferguson and Das Gupta 1968). Such studies are of considerable significance for political scientists, educators and administrators attempting to measure the effect of governmental policies, population movements and similar factors on educational success, social ability and on political competition among interest groups. Their linguistic validity, however, is limited by the fact that they accept native stereotypes of language, dialects or speech varieties, treating these as operationally valid units in much the same way that the earlier anthropologist accepted the native definition of tribe, village or region in determining the bounds and frame of reference of his own research.

## Survey approaches to sociolinguistics

A second research tradition in our first category, that of linguistic variability studies, focuses directly on grammatical analysis of the speech performance of human groups and has more direct relevance for both

grammatical and social theory (Labov 1966, 1973; Shuy Wolfram and Riley 1969). This tradition has its origins in the findings of dialectologists and students of language contact, that the Saussurian assumption, that interpersonal variation at the level of speech can be explained in terms of uniform systems of abstract categorical rules, is simply untenable. When analyzed in sufficient detail and related to everyday usage, grammatical structures always contain both invariant and variable features. Given proper elicitation and sampling procedures, the latter variable rules can be shown to have a direct relation to social parameters such as socioeconomic stratification, role, division of labor, and the like.

Variability theorists agree that the theoretical linguists' insistence on abstracting sentences from actual speech situations and thus operating with hypothetical constructs such as Chomsky's 'ideal speakers' speaking in 'ideally uniform' communities has led to some fundamental insights into the nature of grammatical processes. But they go on to argue that to divorce linguistic analysis from everyday communication, is to preclude systematic study of some of the very problems of grammar and language change that have traditionally been of major concern to linguists. Since language change is socially motivated, its investigation is dependent on valid assumptions about the social matrix within which it operates. The solution they advocate is a shift in focus from the analysis of language, styles, and dialects, seen as self contained units, to the study of the linguistic repertoires, i. e., the totality of speech variants occurring in existing groups. Sociolinguistic analysis accordingly must begin with the identification of actual speech communities and focus on what members say, regardless of preconceived notions of grammatical homogeneity or genetic origin.

During the last few years, work in this tradition has grown both in volume and in sophistication. A new sociolinguistic paradigm has developed, which uses highly sophisticated questionnaire techniques to elicit natural speech in a variety of styles, ranging from formal to colloquial. The model of society employed is essentially the traditional one, which, when reduced to its fundamentals, holds that humanity is divisible into a discrete set of groups and that communication is analyzable in terms of a finite number of settings. The internal structure of any such group is viewed in functionalist terms as a system of organized diversity in which interpersonal variation can be explained in terms of statistical regularities among systematically related social indicators.

The sociolinguist working in this tradition begins by recording the everyday speech of significant numbers of speakers, selected according to the usual sampling criteria in a number of different settings (Shuy, Wolfram and Riley 1969; Sankoff 1971). The texts obtained in this way are first

analyzed linguistically at the level of phonology and syntax. The next step is to separate the linguistic features into a) those statable in terms of categorical rules, i. e., rules that hold without exception for all members, b) variable rules, those that vary in relation to other social parameters (Labov 1968, 1973). Categorical features of language are binary in nature and characterizable either by the presence or absence of emic or structurally significant linguistic elements. Their non-occurrence in certain contexts marks an utterance as ungrammatical. Variable features on the other hand are vector like. They take on one or another of a set of values along a directionally determined scale. Thus, for example, variable vowels can appear with several degrees of tongue height or diphthongization, or variable categories of grammar may take one or another form along a scale bounded by formal or informal, standard or substandard extremes.

The value of sociolinguistic variables is relatable to social phenomena in two ways. On the one hand variable rules may be constructed to predict the incidence of variable features in a statistically significant sample of texts collected in different social settings, as a function of one or a set of the usual social indicators such as class, education, ethnic background. On the other hand, texts containing certain variable features of language can be used as the basis for attitude measurements, using attitude measuring scales to show how variable usage affects judgements that listeners make of others and of the social categories they reflect (Lambert 1972; Shuy and Fasold 1973).

The combination of social survey techniques with grammatical analysis is opening up new possibilities for the empirical study of ongoing processes of language change, hitherto thought to be unstudiable. It is of importance for sociology that for the first time rigorous and reproducible methods have been developed for the use of linguistic measures in the study of diffusion processes determining the spread of innovations and the acceptance of new ideas. These new linguistic measures allow us to examine the relation of behavior, i. e., what people say, to judgements or values about behavior, and thus have many potentially important applications to attitude measurement studies of stereotyping and related issues.

But success in the above areas does not automatically mean that this same survey paradigm can be applied to the analysis of social factors in cognition and interpersonal communication. Applied social scientists are mainly concerned with the role that language usage problems play in impeding educational success, in generating mental abnormality and causing inter-ethnic miscommunication. This requires more than the description of intergroup differences. It becomes necessary to see how

these differences affect a particular individual's ability to make himself understood and to perform adequately in actual settings.

In most urban settings clearly demarkable social boundaries are disappearing and the relationship of group norms to individual behavior is becoming more and more problematic. What is needed is empirical work on the effect of differences in language usage patterns on interpersonal communication.

## Sociolinguistic problems of interpersonal communication

Yet systematic analysis of speaking as a process of interaction has hardly begun. In spite of the wide currency of terms such as communicative competence, a term which refers to the individual's ability to speak appropriately, as contrasted with Chomsky's linguistic competence, which covers only control of grammar, there is yet no agreement as to the goals and basic social premises of the interaction approach to verbal communication. No one has attempted to specify the kind of social assumptions «communicative competence» implies and the kind of linguistic data required to study it.

Many sociolinguists, and linguists, as well, deny that social information can be obtained from speech alone, without reference to extra linguistic information. Having demonstrated the limitations of earlier assumptions regarding the homogeneity and analytical independence of grammatical systems, they have gone on to make their own study of sociolinguistic phenomena dependent on the operational validity of the sociological notions of community and social institutions. The distinction they draw between categorical features of language, socially variable features and individual variants, implies a definition of social as 'pertaining to existing groups, institutions or settings'. Such groups, institutions or settings are taken as given, having independent existence, apart from the communication process.

This position is appropriate for a sociolinguistic analysis which is concerned with the characteristics of groups as such. But when the focus of attention shifts to the constraints imposed on speaking by the individuals' membership or in association with group values, the above notion of social becomes subject to all the objections which social theorists have traditionally levelled against the so-called 'order approaches' to human behavior (Garfinkel 1967; Cicourel 1973; Dawe 1970).

Theorists during the last decade have in fact devoted much of their attention to criticizing the reliance on a priori social categories and the

reductionism of survey approaches to social science measurement, pointing out that such measurements are unable to account for everyday behavior. It has been argued that in our modern, constantly changing societies, group membership, ethnic identity, communicative contexts and settings are rarely clearly definable. Actors rely on manipulating such inherent ambiguities in order to gain their ends in everyday interaction. At the level of interpersonal communication, social categories are not necessarily given, but may themselves be communicated as part of the verbal and non-verbal processes by which meaning is conveyed in interactional exchanges (Cicourel 1972; Goffman 1961).

Yet although social theorists have been quite convincing in arguing that social categories can be treated as symbolic systems, they have been unable to suggest replicable and valid methods for studying the functioning of these social symbols. The structural analyses where symbols are dealt with in terms of relationships among abstract entities, do not show how these enter into practical reasoning. In the absence of well defined operational techniques of symbolic analysis most empirical work on social interaction continues to rely on analysts' units, based on a priori categories having no demonstrable relationship to what actors do in their every day routines. It is to solve this problem, the question of how social situations are created and maintained, how social categories and relationships are communicated through everyday behavior and how actors build on their symbolic value to control and influence others, that some sociologists are suggesting that sociology turn to the analysis of language. The hope is that the linguist's analytical models can somehow be adapted to the study of communication content to formulate abstract or underlying social rules, which can account for the individual's ability to interact appropriately in the same way that grammatical rules account for his ability to produce grammatical sentences.

Note, however, that existing models of grammar have so far dealt with only very limited aspects of the total communication process. Much of the rigor of modern linguistics and much of its success is due to the tradition of narrowly defining the range of linguistic data to be subjected to analysis. By restricting their areas of concern, linguists were able to give powerful explanation of some verbal phenomena. Yet, when new questions about language were raised, new kinds of linguistic data had to be considered and new models of grammar devised. The structural linguists of the thirties and forties were concerned only with the isolation and taxonomic classification of grammatical elements in language texts. Their linguistic analysis dealt mainly with phonology and morphology. Chomsky was the first to look at grammar as speakers

knowledge. By raising the question of linguistic competence, he called attention to the potential relevance of linguistic analysis for the study of the human mind. Generative grammarians following his model concentrate mainly on the syntax of complex sentences and on semantic similarity between what, on the surface, seem like grammatically different sentences. Although Chomsky somewhat loosely refers to the verbal skills of individuals, his theory focuses on universals of grammar shared by all humans everywhere, at a level of analysis which is quite abstracted from everyday speech. The distinction between deep and surface syntax and the notion of transformational rules, which relate these two levels, capture the creative aspects of human communicative behavior which distinguish it from other communication systems. But generative grammar is not centrally concerned with the problem of everyday speech and language and dialect diversity.

Variation theorists attempt to deal with this latter issue by modifying data elicitation procedures and introducing sociological sampling. Yet the variable features they have isolated to account for the scalar, non digital nature of some aspects of language, are analyzed only in statistical or probablistic terms. Their view of what constitutes linguistic data, i.e., what is analyzable by means of linguistic techniques, is essentially that of structural linguists and generative grammarians. The basic Saussurian position which distinguishes between core grammatical features of language, such as sequential phonology, morphology and syntax, and secondary features, such as intonation, stress, sentence prosody and stylistic choice, remains unchallenged. Only the former are seen as contributing to meaning. The second group of features are studied only in terms of their social function or of the affect or attitudes they evoke. The implicit assumption is that the communication of affect and of attitudes is somehow separable from the communication of message content.

It is my contention that the above position is untenable and that the distinction between core and marginal features of language, relevant as it is in the study of the referential meaning of isolated words and sentences, must be reexamined, if we are to develop systematic sociolinguistic approaches to interpersonal communication. We must find new methods of analysis that enable us to use semantic techniques in determining how both categorical and variable aspects of language contribute to the interpretation of messages in context. Let me illustrate with an example from everyday interaction:

At the end of an informal graduate seminar, a black student walks up to the professor who is standing surrounded by several other black and white students and addresses him as follows:

1. Could I talk to you for a minute? I'm gonna apply for a fellowship and I was wondering if you would give me a recommendation?

2. The professor answers: Why don't you come to the office and we'll talk about it.

As the group begins to leave the seminar, the black student says, turning his head ever so slightly towards the other black students in the group:

3. I'ma git me a gig. [Rough gloss: 'I am only going to get myself some support'].

Analysis of the above verbal sequence in terms of the survey approach to sociolinguistics would take meaning as given and would focus on the evident grammatical differences between the black student's two utterances. Item one is clearly identifiable as an instance of standard English speech. The syntax is standard and the phonetics, although it has a recognizable tinge of black English, is clearly within the range of standard variables. The contracted phrase *I'ma* (contrasting with the white middle classe contracted phrase *I'm gonna*) in item 1, the phrase *git me* (vs. get myself), the undiphthongized [a:] for «I», and the off glide [I:] in «gig», clearly identify item 3 as black English. Recent studies measuring attitudes toward or subjective evaluations of black and white middle class dialect variables in English furthermore show that while black variables are accepted as normal in black settings, they tend to be stigmatized in public situations. One might predict therefore that a graduate student using such forms, as in the present case, runs the risk of being misunderstood and or incurring pejorative judgement on the part of the audiences. Continued use of such forms in academic contexts might adversely affect a student's educational success (Taylor 1973).

Yet such observations, although quite valid as far as they go, tell us relatively little about what is being communicated in the situation at hand. Participants and others who understand the idiomatic phrase 'get me a gig', when asked to interpret what the speaker meant by his statement in 3, do not necessarily mention the above linguistic and attitudinal facts. They tend to give explanations such as the following: «He was trying to justify himself». «He was addressing himself mainly to the other blacks in the group, as if to explain his earlier remarks by suggesting 'I am still in control. I'm just playing the game as we blacks must do if we are to get along'».

How are such interpretations arrived at? Are they merely matters of

personal attitude? What role do linguistic features of the message play in the interpretation process? Obviously these interpretations are much less «certain», more subject to variation than the semantic judgements about referential meaning that linguists traditionally deal with. A multiplicity of explanations is always possible in these cases and Garfinkel (1972) has shown why that must be so. Yet the above explanation is at least a plausible one. It was accepted as such by other participants in the interaction, as well as by a number of other judges. Given the fact of its ready acceptance as *one possible interpretation*, we can ask: if a speaker accepts our interpretation as a plausible one, what are the linguistic perceptions that enter into this process? What linguistic cues must we assume the listener attends to? What unverbalized social assumptions must he make to arrive at this interpretation?

We begin by noting some further facts about the form of the message in question. Note that in identifying item three as an explanation, listeners are not treating it as an isolated sentence. The utterance is seen as a comment on item one, not as introducing new content. It is the perceived lack of semantic relationship between three and two and the listeners' search for a relationship between one and three that leads to the conclusion that the speaker is 'qualifying' or 'explaining' his earlier request for a recommendation.

Similar relational judgements are made at the phonological level. The two semantically tied utterances are contrasted by an alternation in phonological variables. It is this switch within the same verbal encounter, not the mere use of one or the other code, which suggests that the explanation is addressed primarily to the black members of the audience. But more is involved here than a mere difference in the incidence of particular variables. Note that the variable features in question occur at three grammatically distinct levels: phonology, morphology and lexicon. The interpretation is in part a function of cooccurrence relationships among these variables or expectations about what pronunciations normally go together with what morphological and lexical options. If for example the speaker had said «I'm'a git me a gig», using a standard diphthongized pronunciation of the first person pronoun, similar to that of his «I» in item one, the sentence would have been ungrammatical. The use of the lexical item *gig* in an otherwise standard English sentence like «I am going to get myself a gig» would also have appeared odd. The utterance might have been taken as a joke, but not a serious explanation. Variable features of language, apart from their vector like nature, therefore, have certain syntactic properties which are not normally dealt with in linguistic analysis. These cut across the

usual levels of grammar, yet play an important role in the interpretation process.

The judgement that the speaker is addressing himself to the black members of the audience also implies certain social assumptions about the norms governing language usage. The audience must have at least a comprehension knowledge of all variables involved. But sets must be accepted as forms of English and one set recognized as typical of black speech and the other as characteristic of educated middle-class Standard English. In addition, the audience must also agree that while the two sets of variables are normally used in distinct settings, it is possible to use black forms in settings where standard English is normal and that this latter usage has special communicative significance. If this were not true item three would have had to be dismissed as nonsense or at least as having no relationship to the preceding utterances. Language usage surveys can provide information about general language usage rules, they cannot account for the human ability to contextualize interpretations of norms of appropriateness.

Listeners who have some acquaintance with the speaker or with others of similar social background will further note that the values of the variable in item three are much closer to the black extreme of the Black English - Middle Class English scale than is normal even for informal ingroup communication among educated blacks. The vowel in «get» is [I] and the vowel [I°] in «gig» is overly alongated. The entire sentence furthermore has a sing-song rythm which sets it off from normal unmarked speech rythm. The speaker is mimicking or «marking», as Mitchell-Kernan has called it (1969), acting out a stereotypical black role rather than being himself. He is distancing himself from his words in item three and by implication also from those in item one, to suggest that he is still in control of the situation.

Our example illustrates the close dependence of data on research goals. Although sociolinguistic studies of all kinds deal with everyday verbal behavior in distinct settings, community oriented studies tend to select only those aspects of grammar and speech variation that most effectively characterize the group as a whole. There has been some discussion in the recent literature of cooccurrence constraints of the type illustrated above, or co-variations as Labov (1973) terms it. Some have proposed the action of implicational rules, similar to the sociologists' Guttman scaling to account for relationships among grammatically distinct variables (De Camp 1972). But such rules continue to be viewed as statistical abstractions. The ultimate aim is that of survey sociolinguistics: to clarify grammatical problems and to explain how the social charac-

teristics of human groups affect language. No systematic attempt has been made to examine the role of co-occurrence judgements in the interpretation of sentences. The interactive properties of speech, the constraints that govern the behavior of participants vis à vis each other in any one encounter, are not considered. Hence, assumption about the relationship of statistically analyzable sociolinguistic indeces to individual behavior are not testable within the theoretical framework of group oriented sociolinguistic theory.

There is a need for a speaker oriented theory of language which focuses directly on the strategies that govern the actor's use of lexical, grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge in the production and interpretation of messages in context. Grammatical and sociolinguistic rules, when seen from this perspective, can be regarded as constraints on message form and content, which must be obeyed if the speaker is to gain his end and which when violated, may lead to misunderstanding. The analysts' task is to make an in-depth study of selected instances of verbal interaction, observe whether or not actors understand each other, and then deduce *a*) the social assumptions that speakers must make in order to make sense of what they hear, and *b*) determine the linguistic cues used in the interpretation process. Perhaps because of the ultimate impossibility of ever determining what individuals «really mean», because of the fact that any one message is always subject to a variety of interpretations, linguists, interested in empirical validation have tended to prefer correlational approaches to sociolinguistic measurement. Members interpretive strategies have not been subject to systematic linguistic analysis.

Yet elusive as members' judgements seem, our discussion reveals that the strategies that underlie interpretations *are* subject to analysis. Inductive methods which, like the linguists grammatical analysis, consider the varying contexts and perspectives in terms of which verbal signs can be perceived, grouped together and interpreted, thus may yield important sociolinguistic results.

Note that in the illustration, the speaker builds on the audience's knowledge of grammar and of norms of appropriateness, as well as on their ability to judge norms in relation to context and to utilize personal background knowledge in evaluating messages. Because speakers act as they do the analyst assumes that they associate forms like [a'ma] with blacks and forms like [I'm gonna] with standard English. Presumably if interviewed in an interview context they could provide information on usage rules in the form which is used in sociolinguistic surveys, but this does not mean that speakers actually use their knowledge of

usage rules in this way, here or in any other conversational instance. When members describe their interaction with others, they tend to use expressions such as 'he was addressing himself to the blacks in the group', 'he was rude', 'he was confused', 'he was friendly'. All such evaluations presuppose shared social knowledge. Yet this social knowledge is not overtly verbalized. Rather it serves as the input for semantic judgements about what the speaker does with words. Moreover, the polar sociolinguistic distinction between black and white variables is not sufficient since listeners must also know that '*a'ma*' is more black than the speakers normal black style. What at the level of survey analysis appears as a distributional fact here, takes the form of conventionalized judgement based on the audience's experience. It is this characteristic of the signalling process, the fact that it relies on the typified knowledge which is a function of shared tradition and experience that makes it of interest for the study of social symbolism.

## Some recent approaches to conversation

How can we integrate the above observations into existing research traditions? It is evident that in order to study the function of linguistic signs it will be necessary to find new ways of applying linguistic analysis to hitherto unstudied aspects of verbal communication. The theoretical linguist's recent shift in emphasis from denotation to speech acts is a step in this direction. The initial goal here is essentially that of the grammarian: «to explain the speaker's ability to produce acceptable sentences». But through their study of common grammatical forms such as pronouns, modal verbs, adverbs and conjunctions, linguists have demonstrated that there are many aspects of grammatical rules which cannot be understood as long as linguistics stops with the referential meaning of factual statements. Syntactic structures directly reflect socially determined norms of politeness (R. Lakoff 1972) as well as the deictic placement of utterances in time, space and vis à vis speakers and audiences (Fillmore 1972). To account for these linguistic facts, it is argued semantic analysis must be extended to deal with what ordinary language philosophers following Austin call the illocutionary force of messages, i. e., their intended effect on audiences.

Even the simplest speech acts, for example, the imperative «Shut the door!» if they are to be understood, require that the speaker and hearer share certain presuppositions about conditions which must be satisfied if the act is to be effectively performed. These presuppositions are of two kinds: *a*) factive, i. e., they imply the belief that the door referred to above exists and is open, and *b*) social, in as much as they assume

that speaker and hearer must view their relationship in such a way as to make it plausible that the speaker could be making a request of the hearer (Keenan 1971).

The illocutionary force of a message moreover is generally only indirectly related to the overt syntactic form. As Ervin-Tripp (1972) and Gordon and Lakoff (1972) among others point out, requests such as «Can you open the window?» or «It's hot in here» are understood as such even though they have the syntactic form of questions and statements respectively. Speakers deduce the illocutionary force of such sentences through indirect processes of conversational inference or implicature, as Grice has called them. These processes rely on grammar, as well as on general principles governing the conduct of conversations. In reference to our example, the notion of conversational implicature would explain the fact that listeners identify «I'm gonna apply for a fellowship» as an expression of intent rather than a simple statement about an event which is about to occur and that «Why don't you come to the office?» is seen as a suggestion or a polite request rather than a simple question. The study of this inferential process and of the role grammar plays in it constitutes a major concern of the newly developing field of linguistic pragmatics.

Although work in linguistic pragmatics is only beginning, it has demonstrated, using techniques of linguistic analysis, what linguistic anthropologists have long argued, that at the level of interaction both linguistic and social rules can be treated as semantic phenomena. It follows that the sociolinguistic study of verbal interaction need make no assumptions about the a priori existence of social categories. One need not begin by trying to locate definably separate communities or clearly distinct communicative settings. The very fact that speakers understand each other, that they can agree on particular interpretation of what is meant in everyday interaction, is prima facie evidence for the existence of shared social rules. The study of everyday conversations can thus be used to discover presuppositions about underlying or unverbalized social relationships by using methods similar to those employed in modern generative semantics. The method of investigation here is the psycholinguistic technique of formulating hypotheses about underlying rules, applying these rules to new test frames or situations and eliciting judgements of appropriateness. The investigators ability to manipulate and predict speakers' appropriateness judgements then serves as a test of the validity of the hypothesis.

## Sequencing or turn taking rules

The importance of the linguist's concept of speech act for the study of verbal interaction processes lies in the fact that it applies grammatical analysis to member's categories of speaking. Questions, requests, promises and categories bear a much closer relationship to the way speakers talk about speech than traditional analysts' categories such as 'subject, object, predicate'. In as much as conversation in all societies can be treated as sequences of such speech acts these categories are universals. In theory at least, speech acts can form a basis for a comparative semantic analysis of conversational practices which is not tied to notions of social group or language and dialect and would account for many of the phenomena observed in connection with the above example.

So far, the linguists work on conversational inference has dealt only with the semantics of single sentences. The other linguistic features of the interpretation process have not been systematically considered. Simple utterances such as 'I promise to stop by to see you' and 'He is asking you to leave', cited in the linguistic work on speech acts, are frequently more akin to verbal glosses for speech acts than to their actual linguistic form in context. In everyday interaction conversational inference tends to be based on sequences of utterances interpreted as wholes. As our example has shown, the relationship of one sentence to others within a sequence and its place within the sequence is often crucial to its interpretation.

The recent research by sociologists on formal properties of verbal exchanges deals with this question. The object of study here is the nature of ties or the connection between consecutive turns of speaking. Analysis of a wide variety of English conversations demonstrates that certain systematic relationships among turns of speaking must hold if the conversations are to be maintained at all, and that these relationships follow from relatively few simple universal sequencing rules. Expectations about sequencing furthermore play an important part in the interpretation of meaning (Sacks and Schegloff 1973).

Turn taking studies highlight the fact that speakers interpretive strategies deal with sentences as part of larger interactional wholes and that the ability to engage in and sustain verbal interaction is a part of the speakers linguistic knowledge and is not identical with his ability to generate grammatical sentences. Conversations have structures of their own which are separate from the illocutionary force of component sentences. In many instances of ritual talk, casual chat or phatic communication, what is said is less important than the act of speaking it-

self and the feeling of mutual engagement it generates. All that is necessary for conversation to take place is that speakers wish to interact, that the sentences they utter are minimally grammatical and potentially meaningful for the situation at hand and that they obey appropriate turn taking constraints. It is of course always possible to take isolated sentences and derive the intent which must underlie their appropriate usage. Such reconstructions of intent are important in explaining the grammatical structures of sentences. From the point of view of the interpretative strategies, however, speech act categories arrived at in this way must be regarded as abstract semantic categories. Although they are a vital part of the speakers grammatical knowledge, their relationship to situated meaning needs further investigation.

Thus, important as the above developments are in demonstrating that the study of speakers' intent and conversational structures can be formalized, they nevertheless fail to deal with a number of the problems raised by our example. It seems that for reasons internal to the development of disciplines, each group of scholars has taken as problematic only those aspects of the linguistic signalling process that have been of interest in terms of its own goals, taking the analysis of other aspects of the signalling process for granted.

## Interpretive strategies

There is as yet no general discussion which deals directly with the over-all interpretive strategies that we must postulate if we are to deal with language in sociological terms as an instrument of persuasion and control. Any approach to such strategies must be semantic or cognitive. It must account for all the linguistic cues that enter into the interpretation process. In addition to knowledge of grammar and turn taking rules, certain aspects of surface form of message also contribute to meaning. To say that speech «persuades» and «controls» is also to imply that not all types of linguistic abilities are equally well known by all speakers, that some types of verbal ability are in short supply in at least some situation and therefore more valued. Linguistic variation is thus more than a descriptive fact. The choice among phonological and syntactic and prosodic options is itself an important semantic signalling device.

In our illustration, the phonological alternation and sentence prosody are of crucial communicative importance. The sudden switch from what is regarded as normal style for the occasion, to highly marked black idiom triggers off a search procedure which leads the audience to eva-

luate their previous experience in order to come up with plausible explanations for the switch. This search procedure is general. We can assume that all those who perceive the oddness of item three will engage in the search. Yet the explanations that result are in large part a function of the listener's own individual background.

Note how the speaker's strategy skillfully builds on this difference in individual background. He could of course have conveyed his meaning in many other ways. He could have walked towards the other black students and simply said «Look fellows, I'm just trying to get along» or words to that effect. By shifting to black style he relies on a whole body of ethnically specific traditions and associations which are rooted in Afro-American culture and history. What he seems to be doing is taking that part of the audience, familiar with black rhetoric, into his confidence; appealing to them as if to say «If you can decode what I mean you must share my tradition and if you do, you can understand why I act the way I do». To resort to such indirectness is also to risk misunderstanding. Those listeners who do not regard Black English as suitable for conversation in mixed academic groups and who are unaware of the subtle distinctions between the speakers own «in-group» style and the mimicking style he is using, may conclude that he is distancing himself from the group or making fun of the white members of the audience. As we have pointed out, there is no one interpretation at this level of meaning. Whenever different interpretations are made, however, these differences are a direct function of the listeners language usage norms and of culturally determined background expectations.

Seen as signalling device, selection among phonological or prosodic variables is fundamentally different from other linguistic signs such as morphemes,words or larger syntactic constructions. With the latter, interpretations are always relatable to pronounceable base forms. The base forms have one, or a limited set, of generally agreed on primary meaning which can be discussed in abstract terms or listed in dictionaries, apart from specific contexts. The former, by contrast communicate only indirectly through inferences based on directionality of change or deviation from some normal form. The meaning of such normal forms is in itself always highly context bound. Any general discussion of the semantics of speech variation is therefore dependent on the degree to which notions of speech context can be made explicit. Yet although many recent studies point to the importance of context in language, there is little in the way of a systematic discussion of how and in what ways context affects the interpretation of sentences in everyday interaction.

## Activity types

Perhaps the most informative treatment of speech contexts can be found in the literature on Ethnography of Communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1972). Recent cross-cultural studies have shown that there exist in every society certain types of speech events such as ritual performances, verbal games, religious ceremonials, formal salutations and the like which are marked off by special rules of speaking. They tend to be bounded in time by introductory or closing or other transitional sequences. They may be marked off semantically by special constraints on topics to be discussed and grammatically by constraints on selection of speech style, vocabulary or phonological and syntactic variants or in some case use of special codes. In many cases we find characteristic types of stress rythms, intonation patterns and other paralinguistic features. At other times special sequencing rules apply, as for example in the verbal duelling discussed by Labov (1972) where the rule is that to counter an opponent's accusation it is necessary to top it, i. e., to go it one better, rather than deny it directly.

With a few notable exceptions the comparative ethnographic work deals with speech events as actual happenings occurring in real space and time. Descriptions for the most part concentrate on clearly bounded, often exotic situations which contrast sharply with ordinary verbal interaction. There is no attempt to relate the existence of special speech events to everyday talk in our own urbanized societies. Such talk is not ordinarily tied to particular settings. There are no overtly stated constraints on participating personnel and on choice of speech style. We see ourselves as free to speak our mind in whatever way seems most effective, to shift from topic to topic, from activity to activity without ritualized transitions. Yet the recent research on non-verbal behavior as well as Goffman's highly insightful ethnographic studies in the sociology of everyday interaction clearly show that underneath the apparent unstructuredness of daily talk there are some governing constraints.

I would like to suggest that these constraints are semantic in nature and they enable the speaker to assign anything that is said to one or another abstract *speech activity type*. Speech activity types can be viewed as cognitive maps which imply social presupposition about *1*) the nature of the work being accomplished and the preconditions that must hold if it is to take place; *2*) the placement of the activity in social time and space; *3*) socially sanctioned possible goals, objects and participants that the activity is directed towards; and *4*) the social cate-

gories of actors or causative agents and the social relationship or identity relationships.

Labov's discussion of ritual insults provides further evidence for the semantic consequences of expectations about speech activities. Consider a hypothetical example of two boys standing on a street corner and imagine that the first boy points to a female passer by and exclaims: «There go your mother, Willie». The second boy, noting the person is in fact a stranger, might normally deny the first boy's statement with «You' re crazy; I don't even know her», or words to that effect, and the matter would rest there. But if the first boy has reason to expect that his friends utterance might be an invitation to a verbal game, his denial could be regarded as a sign that he may be afraid and perhaps not verbally competent to engage in the game and by implication to participate in peer group banter.

Another illuminating example derives from the oral report of a Japanese scholar who spent several months visiting in the United States. He had bought a new bicycle and in the hall of the apartment house where he lived other residents often commented on his cycle. The following type of conversation would ensue:

A: What a beautiful bicycle you have.
B: It's nothing; it is the cheapest I could find.
A: I like it. Have a nice day.

After several such incidents the Japanese scholar begins to wonder why people don't like his bicycle. Americans find that he has an odd way of reacting to compliments. The problem is that in Japanese culture «complimenting someone» is a prolonged speech activity involving several exchanges of praise and ritual denials. To accept an initial compliment with a mere thanks seems impolite in the Japanese system. What A should have done is to enlarge on his statement by listing the good features of the bicycle. To accept a first denial is to suggest that the initial statement was not really meant as a compliment.

If expectations about speech activities can be seen as cognitive expectations and if speech activities are not ordinarily tied to specific settings or categories of actors, the cues by which listeners identify activities must in some way be signalled through speech itself. How is this accomplished? How can we analyze language in Bateson's (1971) terms as simultaneously «communicating content» and «communicating about content»?

To some extent speech context is signalled as part of the internal grammatical structure of sentences. Fillmore (1972) in his discussion of the

deictic properties of sentences like the request «May I come in» shows that if the sentence is to be understood as a request for permission to enter, we must assume that more than two participants are involved, that they are separated by some kind of enclosure and that actors involved are in a social relationship such that it is reasonable for the person inside to grant permission to enter to those outside. The reference here is to general and perhaps universal properties of contexts.

In many other cases however more specific or detailed features of speech contexts are signalled by aspects of surface form. This is the case in greetings such as «How are you» or «How do you do» which have become idiomatic or conventionalized to such an extent that replacement of component lexical item by an otherwise referentially equivalent item or addition of a qualifying adverb or adjective, change of stress or intonation patterns will change the very meaning or contextual interpretation of the entire phrase. The interpretation of «There go your mother, Willie» as an invitation to a verbal duel is in part a matter of conventionalization. If the speaker had used a slightly different but referentially equivalent phrase such as «Your mother is over there», or «Your mother is walking on the other side of the street», the likelihood of a literal interpretation would have increased. Note also the difference between sentences such as «Do you have any coffee to go?» which suggests that the request is being made by a customer in a coffee bar, luncheon counter or small restaurant. The referentially equivalent sentence «I'd like a cup of coffee please» carries no such specific situational associations.

If contextualization of meaning is in part a matter of surface form, then sentence prosody should also play an important part in the interpretation process. This is obviously the case in greetings like «How are you?» where a naise in pitch and stress on *you* may change the meaning from a greeting to an enquiry about a persons well being. The following two passages were recorded during a plane trip.

In the waiting lounge over the P. A. system:

1. *Mr. William Smith please come to the information desk!*
2. Mr. Smith will you please come to the information desk?

In a helicopter shortly after landing:

3. We have now landed at San Francisco Airport where the local time is 10:15. We would like to thank you for flying SFO Airlines and wish you a pleasant trip ...
4. (The stewardess continues over the P. A. system with only a

slight pause): Isn't it quiet around here? Not a thing moving.

Item one is spoken in the staccato rhythm, stress and intonation pattern characterisic of announcement style. Item two also transmitted on the P.A. system has the rhythm and intonation of a conversational request. Similarly items three carries the prosodic cues which characterize a routine announcement. Item four, which followed three after only a short pause, caused the audience to look around, to note the almost complete lack of traffic around the airport terminal caused by a strike of airline ground personnel. The difference between announcements and personal statements is more than merely a difference in labels. In the case of announcements the speaker is merely lending his voice to transmit a message which may or may not originate with him and for which he does not necessarily take responsibility. The person summoned in the waiting lounge, for example, may in fact not have to deal with the announcer at all. In a personal call the caller wants to talk to the called directly and his call is judged in terms of the politeness criteria that apply to every day interaction.

In all, except in the very simplest sentences matters of surface form such a prosody, phonological and lexical style, conventionalized expressions play a crucial role in the identification of speech contexts. The referential meaning of sentences is not enough. The hypothesis suggests itself that context judgement, to the extent that they are founded on language, are based on *expectations about cooccurrence relationships between contexts and contextualization markers such as the above.*

The best way to account for these phenomena is to look at interpretative strategies as a two step process in which linguistic phenomena are interpreted in different ways. We assume that as a first step, before determining the detailed import of a message, the listener evaluates the message in general terms. The goal is to find out what kind of a message it is, whether or not it requires a response, who the speaker is and how his information is to be evaluated. This first evaluation which is related to notions of speech activity type, then generates the social presuppositions which apply to the interpretation of component sentences. If these presuppositions are born out by what follows in the interaction, they stand. If not, if something happens to invalidate the first context judgement, the listener recycles to find another activity type which more directly adequately fits the new facts.

Knowledge of grammatical rule plays a part in this first stage of the interpretation process and the linguists notion of grammaticality is important here. When a sentence violates the basic grammatical constraints, it is rejected as ununderstandable or «probably not intended for me».

But note that grammaticality judgements, when seen in this perspective, also depend on the individual's own personal background and not merely on the linguists definition of grammatical system. There are good linguistic reasons for classifying black dialects of English as subsystems of English (Labov 1973). Yet in our example, listeners who by virtue of their previous communicative experience had not been exposed to Black English and do not recognize «I'm'a» as a variant of «I'm gonna» or «I'm going to» and who were unfamiliar with the word «gig», refused to interpret item three.

In other cases, messages that by reference to grammatical criteria alone are clearly interpretable, are nevertheless disregarded. This is the case in, for example, some mixed adult children groups where several parallel conversations may be carried on and speakers use their knowledge of contextualization cues to identify messages addressed to them. In many ethnically mixed societies furthermore members claim they cannot understand speech varieties associated with competing ethnic groups, even though if pressed they are readily able to assign interpretations to sentences in the deviant variety. Similarly foreigners who have taken great pains to learn a new language may sometimes find their attempts to practice the new language in site rejected by statements such as «I don't speak your language». Here the listener obviously pays more attention to the contextualization cues than to the grammar and context of what is said.

Although detailed empirical studies of interpretive strategies are lacking and analytical methods are not yet clearly specified, the conceptual apparatus for studying language in these terms is becoming available. It seems clear that if sociolinguistics is to deal with human issues in communication, it will not be possible to do so in either purely formal or purely statistical terms. We must find some way to deal with communicative phenomena without relying on a priori assumptions about group membership or shared values, while at the same time accounting for the symbolic and conventional nature of verbal signs *.

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