

The Pragmatics of language: Theoretical and Applied Issues*

Carol A Prutting PhD
University of California
Santa Barbara, California

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the contributions made by the paradigm shift which has occurred in our discipline. Comments are also made from the broader perspective of the philosophy of science.

OPSOMMING

Die artikel beskou die bydrae wat gemaak is deur die paradigmitiese verskuiwing wat plaasgevind het in ons dissipline. Opmerkings word ook gemaak vanuit 'n breër perspektief van die filosofie van die wetenskap.

“I cannot give any scientist of any age better advice than this: the intensity of the conviction that a hypothesis is true has no bearing on whether it is true or not”
(Medawar, 1979, p. 39).

Once a hypothesis is made the scientist is in business. It guides the observation and suggests empirical tests which might otherwise not have been performed. In the past few years a shift in out theoretical models has taken place. We, as a discipline, have moved from a linguistic paradigm (Chomsky, 1957; 1965) to a philosophical one (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

The changes we have experienced and what this shift represents for the field of speech and language pathology will be discussed. Under the linguistic generative grammar paradigm the innate predisposition to learn language was of primary import for learning an abstract set of rules to account for one's knowledge of language. In the philosophical speech act paradigm an account of what speakers and listeners do in various communicative interactions is of paramount interest. Within this framework much attention is given to the contextual influences in the environment which account for one's ability to perform in a competent manner. In the case of the former model the focus is on the speaker. In the latter model, the unit of analysis is the dyad.

Proponents of the linguistic paradigm define language as a set of sentences. The philosophical paradigm defines language as an instrument for social interaction. Generative grammarians view the function of language as the expression of thought, whereas for the speech act enthusiasts, the function is to communicate. Competence is viewed differently as well for both camps. From a linguistic framework competence is discussed as the ability to produce, comprehend and judge grammatical-

ness. In contrast, from a philosophical viewpoint competence is rooted in social competence, i.e. the ability to initiate, maintain, and terminate relationships.

Humboldt (1836), writing over a century ago, inspired Chomsky (1957, 1965) with his notion of the generative aspects of language. Humboldt maintained that language makes infinite use of finite means. Austin (1967) and Searle (1969) were influenced by the early pragmatist Peirce (1878) as well as James (1907) and Wittgenstein (1958) all of whom believed that language meaning was in its use. Peirce, in turn, was very much affected by the early philosophy of Kant (1781).

It is true that rival theories such as the linguistic and speech act seldom address the exact same set of problems. Some issues are lost and others gained whenever different theories evolve. Kuhn (1962) suggested that no paradigm solves all problems. However, paradigm debates do revolve around the question: which particular problems are more significant to have solved?

There is a certain discomfort which takes place when theories shift within a discipline. The discomfort can be replaced by the quest for solutions, a respect for time, and an understanding that in science there are more disproofs than there are proofs. Lewis Thomas (1983), recent author of *The Youngest Science*, suggests a healthy state is that of “informed bewilderment” with our feet firmly planted in mid-air. This is a difficult state to maintain especially among the younger members of a profession.

Theories are invaluable in that they can be likened to road maps for problem solving. They lead us to ask certain questions and select one methodological solution over another. Our empiricism does not always keep pace with our theoretical constructs. However, methodology can sometimes outstrip theory. For instance, both the Babylonians and Egyptians employed

* This paper is a written version of the P de V Picnaar Memorial Lecture delivered on September 21, 1983 at the University of Pretoria.

mythology to explain astronomical phenomena. For the Babylonians the earth was a hollow mountain and the universe was an oyster with water underneath and overhead. Similarly, the Egyptians conceived of the universe as a more rectangularly shaped oyster or box; the earth was its floor, while the sky was a cow whose feet rested on the four corners of the earth. During this time Chaldean priests observed the stars and made maps and timetables of positions and movements. The timetables became calendars used to regulate agricultural activities and religious ceremonies. These observations and calculations were precise and deviated less than .001% from our modern calculations. In this example we have an exact science, in terms of accurate predictions, outstripping a theoretical construct.

Gould (1981), in an excellent book entitled *The Mismeasure of Man*, writes about science as a social act which has subjectivity at its core. Science is that exploratory activity whose purpose is to understand the world for the betterment of society. The actual exploratory activity is termed research. There are many theories generated and many ways of going about understanding and bringing order to the phenomena under study. Medawar (1979) has discussed the various ways toward understanding:

Baconian – Truth is all around us and one needs only to observe things as they really are.

Aristotelian – One has preconceived notions of the world and one needs to act on these ideas.

Galilean – One discriminates between different ways of doing something and this either gives one confidence in one's view or alters one's view in some way.

Kantian – One's view of the world is based on a prior knowledge.

All of these approaches are justifiable and each, in somewhat different ways, adds to and contributes to our understanding of the world. Once our theoretical underpinnings are tightened they give way to methodological considerations. Some of our choices in design are descriptive, experimental, longitudinal, and cross-sectional. The choice one makes generally has to do with one's theoretical orientation, the research question asked, and the background of literature in which the study will be embedded.

The theoretical shift which has taken place in our discipline is enumerated elsewhere (Prutting, 1982). For the purposes of this paper only the sediments which remain after shifting through the speech act theory will be presented. The implications of these changes are far reaching for the communicatively disordered client. What follows is an outline of the changes as a result of our theoretical shift:

ASSESSMENT PRINCIPLES

AREAS OF ASSESSMENT:
Analysis across linguistic, cognitive, and social domains. Bates (1979) slightly tongue and cheek concludes there are some 30 000 possible models for

INTERVENTION PRINCIPLES

COMPETENCE:
Goals should be toward relevant and functional communicative interaction. The demonstration of

understanding this three-way relationship. As Fuller (1975) suggests with his idea of "synergy" – the behavior of whole systems is unpredicted by their parts taken separately. It is therefore important to view the three areas in relationship to the entire communicative system of any given client.

UNIT OF MEASUREMENT:
The dyad should be the unit of analysis since competence lies in the relational system and as such should be assessed with relational parameters intact.

SOCIETAL AS PRIORITY OVER CLINICAL JUDGEMENTS:
Societal judgements are concerned with appropriate or inappropriate appraisals rather than correct/incorrect.

A behavior may indeed be incorrect but appropriate. Appropriate is defined as positive or neutral effects on the interaction while inappropriate behaviours detract or penalize the communicator. As Johnson said some time ago – for a behavior to be different it must make a difference.

One can easily see the important changes which have taken place with our shift in paradigms. One last contribution has to do with criteria for dismissal from remediation. Prior to our shift we most often enrolled and dismissed clients with reference to their scores on standardized tests. In America, many guidelines set up by various states utilized a 1 or 2 standard deviation from the mean on a standardized test in the areas of phonology, syntax, and/or semantics. Today, we are considering dismissal when we can document that a client has improved some aspect of the communicative system and is thus better able to manage relationships with others, through communication, with more ease and comfort. It is quite evident that theoretical changes have filtered down to the clinical treatment of clients.

There is no doubt that the focus in the mid-eighties is on the social dimensions of communication. As Johnson (1946) stated decades ago: "leaving any consideration of language behavior

social conventions, cognitive knowledge of the world, and linguistic rule-governed behavior is competence.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERVENTION:

- Behavior Goals
 - Communicative Acts (i.e. speakers intentions and effects on listeners requests, responses, statements).
 - Social Roles (formal/informal, egalitarian/unequal, work/social).
 - Discourse Rules (obligations and options of speakers and listeners, i.e. turn-taking, topic maintenance and shift, cohesion strategies).
- COMPENSATORY STRATEGIES:
 - Permit and encourage the use of alternative methods to carry out the goals and obligations of appropriate, effective, and successful discourse. Some strategies already identified are: repetition, grammatical and phonological simplification, reliance on nonverbal behavior to revise utterances.

out of a discussion of personality would be somewhat like leaving the cheese out of a cheese souffle. As a matter of fact, most of the key terms that we customarily use in talking about personality are seen, on close scrutiny, to refer somehow to reactions that are made to and with words and other symbols" (p. 243).

Why deal with the social aspects of communication alongside of linguistic and cognitive aspects? Argylé (1983) has some startling evidence to support the fact that with a rich network of social relationships one lives longer and is happier. Can we then think of any better reason for dealing with communicative behaviors from a social perspective?

The communicative system is an individual's most powerful tool for getting along in this world. In Steiner's, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* (1981) he describes words as able to heal, bless, cripple, and kill. There seems to be nothing which cannot be done with the power of words. For example one can see how Hitler with his verbal and paralinguistic communicative abilities committed hideous crimes against all humanity. Gandhi, on the other hand, communicated through silence and enriched the lives of millions.

We are in an exciting and challenging era and those of us who call ourselves speech, language clinicians are in the business of social change. I do not imagine our clients will turn out to be any more homogeneous in the area of pragmatics than they are in the areas of phonology, syntax, and semantics. The shift is exhilarating. As is often the case this paradigm shift appears to be a revisit from the earlier days when our field was just developing —

"We shall not cease from exploration and in the end of our exploring will be to arrive when we started and know the place for the first time."

— T.S. Eliot

REFERENCES

- Argyle, M. *Visiting Scholar*, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa, August 1983.
- Austin, J. *How to do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- Bates, E., Benigni, L., Bretherton, I., Camaioni, L., and Volterra, V. *The Emergence of Symbols*. New York: Academic Press, 1979.
- Chomsky, N. *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton, 1957.
- Chomsky, N. *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965.
- Fuller, R.B. *Synergetics*. New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- Gould, S. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981.
- Humboldt, W. von. *Über die Verschiedenheit des Menschlichen Sprachbaues*. Berlin, 1836.
- James, W. *What Pragmatism Means — Pragmatism; A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1907.
- Johnson, W. *People in Quandaries*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946.
- Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. (First edition, 1781). New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1978.
- Kuhn, T. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Lewis, T. *The Youngest Science*. New York: The Viking Press, 1983.
- Medawar, P.B. *Advice to a Young Scientist*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979.
- Peirce, W. *How to Make Ideas Clear*. *Popular Science Monthly*, 1878, 12, 286–302.
- Prutting, C.A. *Pragmatics as Social Competence*. *J. Speech Hear. Dis.*, 1982, 47, 123–134.
- Searle, J. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: University Press, 1969.
- Steiner, G. *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.
- Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1958.