Speech Acts, Social Meaning and Social Learning

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There are many large issues which could be studied by a union of linguists and social psychologists such as the issues surrounding language identities of the large immigrant groups here in Britain, conditions affecting diversity or uniformity of language and of dialect in a country still rich in dialect variation, the role of mass media in altering those prejudices.

But it seems that a major gap still exists among researchers. The gap is between those for whom talk itself is the main data and those for whom talk about talk is primary. Surely authentic conversation must be at the centre of our field. Yet it is not, except in a minority of studies.

What I would like to do here is to report some work I have been doing with authentic interaction and then discuss the relation of this work to concerns expressed by others.

Some 15 years ago I became interested in the possibility that the kind of directives people give each other might reflect the social system. At that time Roger Brown's (1965) work on address had suggested two major dimensions. It had also shown that address choices could be seen as a kind of tree structure (Ervin-Tripp 1968). It seemed that directives might be a good place to find an even richer system of variation. They might also show us how we use context.

My first approach was to collect many instances from samples of particular settings where socially diverse people could be found, like hospitals, the armed services and schools. A strong system emerged, showing the same social variables that kept appearing: these were familiarity, rank, age, territory, difficulty of task and so forth. As it turned out, these did not form as good a structure as did address and what we could not do was to predict the form of directives without knowing more about continuous interaction - about context.

So now I have 80 or so videotaped natural interaction home scenes in five families with two or three children between two and eight. I want to find out how social control is managed by language in these families. So we identified episodes in which verbal control moves occurred - moves to alter the action of the others.

How could we identify and classify these in a way that could lead to rules for control act forms?
S. Ervin-Tripp

Finally psychologists have a long history of paying attention to language. Attention analysis, interaction analysis, various coding systems for the measurement of interaction have existed for decades.

The level of detail by psychologists has been at an inferential level. For instance, we code commands, or we code dominance. Both of these categories are cultural categories from everyday vocabulary. A command is an old form in English, as in Latin. Dominance is a kind of judgment of overall relationship, which people make rather easily. Indeed, children's statements (Brown, 1975) essentially showed that this is one of the kinds of impressions people take away from an interaction even if they cannot recall the relative number of commands.

The process of developing a content or interaction analysis code is a kind of bi-cultural process. We collect a group, socialize them to our meanings, notify discrepancies, judge reliability by the extent of agreement, and put assurance on deviations to raise the reliability of their coding. High reliability signifies to a good group process, but it may not tell us very much about what we really need to have, which is transitivity, indeed reusability, between coding levels. For example, if I code form classes in English for at least 20 classes such as articles, and prepositions, and conjunctions, a coder can play a finite list. Along with a knowledge of sequential rules of English it possible then to reconstruct possible sentences, to go from the abstracted level to the particular case again. Unless we can do that, unless we know enough about the rules of choices in performance, we have lost a lot of information when we code. We have lumped, rather than shifted levels and in a system with claims psychological reality of levels.

do not know if the analysis of speech acts will help us with this problem or not. Work on the analysis of speech acts has been divided into two camps which are not much to do with each other. On the one hand are linguists and philosophers who have been puzzling by the fact that the same utterance can mean different things depending on the context (Searle, 1969, Gordon and Lakoff 1975). They did like to derive rules of interpretation so that they can find out what these meanings are people such as philosophers are interested in such meanings as deference, compliance, solidarity, distance, anger and affection. They have noticed that the same meaning in terms of instrumental transactions can be achieved by quite different means, the means conveying various social implications. Clearly these seem must be met.

: me begin with some examples. Suppose you walk into a friend's house and see three year old cutting carrots with a very large knife. You might say to child: (1) "Can I help you?"

Are you doing? Are you making an offer to help, which the child could refuse? Are you stating your intention to help with or without the child's consent, perhaps at the same time moving in to take over the process? The sign in your plane is the same: you are doing the cutting. The difference between an offer and a statement of intent is in the social relationship, in the intent to which the child is a beneficiary in control of what happens.

suppose you are cutting carrots yourself and the same little child says to "Can I help you?". I think you will not hear it as an offer, but as a request, even a plea, for permission to do something the child wants more than you. I would certainly be unlikely to consider yourself the beneficiary of an offer, if the child was a certified Montessori-trained carrot slicer.

Speech Acts, Social Meaning and Social Learning

Yet the difference between these situations is not in the actions. In each case relative skills of the speaker and hearer. There are in fact grounds for some I think that when children given an offer say "O.K.," they seem to imply that they offer or request.

Notice that people could be very clear about whether they meant offers, commands, carrots" or "I'll cut the carrots", or "I'll help you if you want". But they desired action and a social relationship.

Turn to another example. Picture an elderly landlady and her student in conversational situation. The landlady says "Can we move the trash can (dustbin) over here?" The pronoun occurs. Note that the conventional request for unexpected service would trash can. How can the student hear this as implying action for himself? In English Doctors say we'll take his temperature at midnight even when they will not be able tonap. Hence if the student regarded himself as subordinate he would hear the request clearly.

Suppose he says to the landlady "Can we move the trash can over here?" The landlady will hear his asking permission to move the bin. So, in the first example deliberately tuned this system is to munificence. A Turkish student who actually said was misunderstood. The landlady replied, "I didn't know you had a zoom mate!"

In this case an understanding of who is to move the dustbin requires recognition whether or we are hearing a request for permission or an offer in the first case unrelatively.

Each of these examples conveys two potential messages: you move the dustbin +

How can we as observers tell which is meant? We have an equation with two un-

In each of these examples there is also a further social message. In the first anyway seems to imply social distance. This is a typical form of superior or unrelativistic. The notion of distance, applying both to persons, asymmetry, further than distance as a major factor, and so a subordinate would not be given such a form by a child except perhaps in role play.

If we had clear messages about the action wanted or had we would have imperatives like relationships they might be statements like "Cut carrots" or "Can do that better", or "You're

"Carry the dustbin" or "Let me help you". If we had clear messages about social the board". We do of course have all of these sometimes. There is a group in
Speech Acts, Social Meaning and Social Learning

Next we moved to videotaping naturalistic conversations in families. Our purpose was to identify the contribution of non-verbal communication to the development of the complexity of the system at different ages. We also thought there might be enough diversity of age and role within the family. This work confirmed our less systematic observations that by the middle of the second year children can already differentiate equals, subordinates and superiors, to insiders and outsiders, that is to social maturity. This differentiation is primarily taken for granted by the age of two or three. The younger ones are not yet sensitive to these differences. There are also important differences in the way of communication with different families. My experience is not my own but that of a friend's family.

We also observed that the normal, unmarked social form for directives by parents was different from family to family. One must know what form is to identify the role of the actors in each activity. We began to use speech acts in order to identify the expected social form in which these actions would be performed. We observed how the speakers use speech acts in their conversations with each other.

A large part of our effort has been in developing Situated Communication and Social Learning studies. If it is the case that forms speakers use are sensitive to the social context, we need to know whether people hear a speaker's message and how the form of the act is performed. We would then be concerned with the way in which children learn to act in the form of speech acts in the different social contexts.

We also tried to find out if children heard as directives statements and questions. For example, "Is the checker there?" which made no other explicit reference to the situation in mind. Such statements are possible because the children have learned to interpret their mother's question in the way the speaker intended it. They may be interpreted literally if the information in the statement is not enough to change their actions when no act was mentioned.

So if someone was looking for a checker, and said, "Is the checker there?" children would return the checker because they said the speaker needed it. Not a more general statement like "Is there a checker?" which can be interpreted differently.

S. Ervin-Tripp

The act of communicating requires us to attend to someone else's social cues and to use these cues to decide how to respond. The point of communicating is to get what the other person wants or expects. In this system, we signal both what we want and what is expected by them. We can help indicate adult/child, role/information, role/order at all times, through our choice of means to convey speech acts, stranger at all times, through our choice of means to convey speech acts.
Speech Acts, Social Meaning and Social Learning

of sex. But we need also to examine identity-marking functions of gender differences in language and see if they are heightened in particular conditions, e.g.

3. It has been demonstrated that the deeper realization patterns as well as the happens when new learners must shift from one to the other? Do they take the a fairly surface level?

Native speakers appear to realize and interpret the acts we have been studying through a combination of idiomatic forms and more systematic analysis schemes. The problem becomes more acute in scenes where what is necessary is situationally used needs across language. Many of the perceived attributes of differences, we all know, are not just matters of language forms but sociolinguistic, sociolinguistic differences are not.

We have made a point of separating the actions or goal-states which underlie people's plans from the speech acts through which they use others as instruments, between groups can exist at any of these levels.

Attention has been directed already at group differences, at assimilation and what I have called an adaptation to is that language also does social acts, and systemically relies on social features to do so. The mapping rules between how people code their social world. Indeed, learning to do these acts is a major form of social instruction. In examining authentic interaction we

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asked that the social factors in the realization of control acts of the have been studying are so strong they override other factors. For in adult who says to a 20 month old "where do you think this goes?" or "anna help me?" is not making syntactic simplification primarily.

set that analysis of speech differences between speakers should extend utes of language functions and to realization of function in language. mg clearly what these realizations are we can help accelerate character-

The observations of R. Lakoff (1975) and P. Brown and Levinson (1978) about sex differences provide good examples. It might be, for example, that participants Lakoff call "eating acts" more women than men rank themselves low. The result of a higher incidence of forms which arise from a stance of deference, dings like "can you?" "could you?" "would you mind?" more use of naming doit requests which do not name what is desired. That is, the most com

is that the primary difference is just rank or power and that within-sex me controlling that feature would show the same effects. O'Barr and

1980) courtroom studies suggest that this might be true, since high-status like more like men. Current changes in the occupational experience of wide ample opportunity for controlling factors of experience independent of
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