Language in Life, and a Life in Language: Jacob Mey – A Festschrift
Edited by Ken Turner and Bruce Fraser
© 2009 by Emerald Group Publishing Limited. All rights reserved.

9

The Force of Language and its Temporal Unfolding

Alessandro Duranti

1. Context as Knowledge

Pragmatics as an interdisciplinary field has expanded the concept of language as an object of inquiry to include the use of language by its speakers. This interest among pragmaticians originated from two sets of observations: (1) some linguistic expressions cannot be understood without reference to the context of their use (e.g. personal pronouns and other deictic elements of linguistic systems) and (2) utterances not only describe the world or, rather, the experience of it, but also act upon the world, affecting our experience and the experience of others. From its inception, then, pragmatics has been two-faceted. It encouraged an expansion of the notion of language both as a code and as action. In terms of language as a code, pragmaticians focused on the grammaticalization of contextual variants such as the social status of the speaker and hearer or their social relations. In terms of language as action, the focus has been on the conditions that allow for a given utterance to have certain conventional effects.

In both cases, researchers saw pragmatics as an alternative both to the logicians' view of meaning as a propositional calculus and to Chomsky's favoring of linguistic competence over linguistic performance. The new focus of interest for pragmatics was not just on "language" but "language in context." At first, this meant that researchers wrestled with one main question: How does the context shape the ways in which language is used? The range of factors or dimensions deemed relevant for identifying the impact of context on language was quite vast and included the age, sex, and social class of speakers or hearers, the style of speaking, the events or activities in which language was being used, the institutional roles of participants in the interaction,

and the organization (or flow) of information in the prior discourse. Soon, however, researchers also realized that the relationship between language and context was bidirectional. Language shapes context just as much context shapes language (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992). For example, the choice of a particular linguistic expression (e.g. *tu* vs. *vous* in French) not only presupposes certain aspects of context, it also establishes them as part of the context that is being currently constructed. A request (e.g. *can I borrow your car?*) sets up a context in which the response that follows is likely to be interpreted as either an agreement or a rejection.

Despite this insight, however, most students of pragmatics have continued to treat context as knowledge and have thus failed to properly address one major question: How is knowledge transformed into action? In other words, we still do not have a clear understanding of how words actually move people to act in certain ways as opposed to others. More generally, it has been difficult for pragmaticians to bridge the gap between the notions of language as code and language as action. In what follows, I will suggest that this is partly due to the tendency to think in terms of strategic interaction (e.g. in discussing politeness) and the inability to fully appreciate the ethical implications of temporality in human interaction. Before getting to this issue, however, we need to reconsider the notion of the "force" of language.

2. Force of Language

The idea that language has some kind of power and plays a major role in the constitution of the social world in which speakers find themselves is by no means new, as demonstrated by the treatises of public oratory written by ancient Greek and Roman authors (e.g. Barthes, 1970; Pernot, 2000) and by the vast literature on linguistic relativity (Whorf, 1956; Hill and Mannheim, 1992; Lucy, 1992; Duranti, 1999). But the idea that the concept of meaning could also be understood as a force is more recent. It is found in the writings of two important thinkers of the twentieth century: the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the philosopher J.L. Austin.

Malinowski uses the term "force" in his examination of the power that magical formulas seemed to have for the Trobrianders (Malinowski, 1935, Vol. 2, p. 9). In his analysis, "... language is a cultural force in its own right. It enters into manual and bodily activities and plays a significant part in them, a part *sui generis* which cannot be replaced, even as it does not replace anything else" (Malinowski, 1935, Vol. 2, p. 21). This perspective suggests that the force of language is crucial for the constitution of particular social activities and at the same time cannot be understood outside of those activities.

Austin's concept of "force" is found in his posthumous *How to Do Things with Words* and was meant to capture the ways in which a given utterance should be "taken," that is, in terms of its *effects* on language users and the context of their interactions. Austin's introduction of the concept

of force in this case seems strategic. It allowed him to reserve the term "meaning" for what Frege had called "sense" (*Sinn*) and "reference" (*Bedeutung*) (Austin, 1975: 100).

However, neither Malinowski nor Austin further pursued the potential implications of the metaphor that they had introduced. For example, they did not discuss the possible connection between force and violence. What would be the consequences of thinking about language use as violent? No one fully explored this idea until Pierre Bourdieu (1982) introduced the concept of symbolic domination. For Bourdieu, the social meanings and social implications of language are imposed on its users by a linguistic market that they cannot control even though they contribute to its reproduction through the unconscious dispositions (or *habitus*) they acquire through socialization. The following excerpt from a public debate with Terry Eagleton is useful for understanding Bourdieu's views on the force of language. In this passage Bourdieu identifies the imposition of English upon someone (like him) who is not comfortable speaking English as an instance of "symbolic violence":

> Through the concept of symbolic violence I try to make visible an unperceived form of everyday violence. For example, here in this auditorium now I feel very shy; I am anxious and have difficulty formulating my thoughts. I am under a strong form of symbolic violence which is related to the fact that the language is not mine and I don't feel at ease in front of this audience. I think that the concept of ideology could not convey that, or it would do so in a more general manner. (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1994: 266)

The self-awareness Bourdieu demonstrated in this instance is not unusual or restricted to social theorists. All kinds of people recognize the force that language has in everyday life. Sometimes language is seen as dangerous and other times it is seen as empowering.

3. Becoming Aware of the Force of Language

The idea that language can be violent or dangerous (Brenneis and Myers, 1984) can be found in warnings such as *watch your language!* or in assessments such as *that was rude*, both of which require what Silverstein (2001) called "metalinguistic awareness." Such utterances exemplify a stepping out of the "natural" flow of speaking to provide a characterization of the type of action that has been performed through linguistic communication. This stepping out involves a type of phenomenological modification whereby we manage to bracket what Edmund Husserl (1931) called the "natural standpoint" (*die natürliche Einstellung*) and assume a new, "theoretical standpoint." The latter standpoint allows us to reflect on the meaning of our own or someone else's actions. A possible effect of this modification of our stance toward something that has been said is the realization that speakers are not always in control of their own language or, rather, of the

Emerald_SP-V006_9.indd 65 2/12/2009 6:40:23 AM

potential meanings of their utterances. This idea is succinctly articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin in the following passage, where the issue of control over our own words is cast in terms of the intentions imbued in the utterances we use: "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (Bakhtin, 1981: 294).

Unfortunately, the tendency to read Bakhtin's theory as "dialogism" has curtailed the potential impact of his work for a theory of language as both code and action. In addition to the emphasis on the need to think about meaning as collaboration (or collusion) between speakers and hearers, Bakhtin was drawing attention to the "difficult and complicated process" of controlling the meaning of what we say. To the extent that we think of language, as he did, as "a difficult and complicated process," we must leave room for temporality. The issue is where and how temporality can be recognized.

4. Letting the Force Show Itself: Temporal Unfolding and the Ethics of Rejection

One of the most important contributions of conversation analysis has been its focus on the sequential organization of talk. Among the insights gained by such a focus, is the temporal unfolding of agreement and disagreement. In a lecture originally delivered in 1973 and published posthumously, Harvey Sacks shows that in English conversation not only is there a tendency for agreement ("yes" is more frequent than "no"), but there is also a preference for turns that display agreement to be contiguous, i.e. to appear immediately after the turn where a question/request was made. On the other hand, when disagreement occurs, it is delayed, that is, it is "pushed rather deep into the turn that it occupies" (Sacks, 1987: 58). Here is one of the examples provided by Sacks:

A: Yuh comin down early?
B: Well, I got a lot of things to do before getting cleared up tomorrow.
I don't know. I w- probably won't be too early.

As Sacks points out, in this case we can see "that this response is not only formed so that the disagreement is made as weak as possible, but it is held off for a great part of the turn" (Sacks, 1987: 58). One of the ways to hold off a response is not saying anything. As argued by Pomerantz (1984a), silence is interpreted as nonaffiliation or potential disagreement and gives prior speakers a chance to resume talk and change their original assessment as to reduce the possibility of disagreement.

Heritage (1984) suggests that this preference for agreement and contiguity exists because it promotes affiliation rather than disaffiliation in human interaction. Similarly, building on Goffman's notion of "face," in Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory of politeness flat rejection of an offer or of a request is said to be dispreferred because it is a face-threatening act. Politeness formulas of various sorts are at work precisely to compensate for the violation of a person's face, understood as a Durkheimian "sacred self." These explanations address the important finding that people are more likely to agree than to disagree (or to accept than to reject), but they do not say much about the *delay* in disagreeing or why delaying would be preferred over not delaying. Among the possible reasons for the lack of further theorization on this aspect of disagreements, I would like to briefly focus on two. The first is the tendency in pragmatics to think in terms of strategic interaction. The second is a limited understanding of temporality as a dimension of interaction that includes a fundamentally intersubjective moral stance.

The tendency to think in terms of strategic interaction is best represented by Goffman's work. For Goffman, we can think of the self as "as an image pieced together from the expressive implications of the full flow of events in an undertaking" and as "a kind of player in a ritual game who copes honorably or dishonorably, diplomatically or undiplomatically, with the judgmental contingencies of the situation" (Goffman, 1967: 31). Simplifying, we could say that for Goffman a person can only strategize at *playing* but not at *being* someone – a view apparently influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's writings (Raffel, 2002). In this perspective, the "face" must be protected as a way of avoiding embarrassment (for ourselves or for others), keeping interaction smooth, minimizing loss of status and prestige, and avoiding resentment or retaliation.

The strategic reading of these preoccupations reveals Goffman's notion of "face" to be quite different from the notion of "face" (*visage*) introduced by Emmanuel Levinas to talk about subjective and yet universal responsibility toward and on behalf of an Other. For Levinas, the relationship with the naked face of the Other is always and immediately ethical ("la relation au visage est d'emblée éthique" Levinas, 1982: 81). Others are not mere observers and evaluators of what we do, they are also guides: they represent and enact a call for our good side to come out. Seen from this point of view, the delay in disagreeing or rejecting an offer can be interpreted in moral-existential terms rather than in strictly strategic terms – with the appropriate theoretical caveats that one does not exclude the other. Taking time to say something that we know we should not say provides us with the opportunity not only to mitigate the impact of our response on our interlocutor but also to absorb its impact on ourselves, given that in disappointing the Other we are also disappointing ourselves.

In this reading of human interaction, any kind of mitigation (including possible explanations) that we provide for the Other is also a mitigation (and, sometimes, a justification) of the impact of the act on ourselves. The ethics of responsibility is actualized in time and depends on temporality as a crucial meaning-making tissue of human existence. The notions of retention and protention are critical for the understanding of how this works (Schutz, 1967; Husserl, 1991).

The retention of what we just did, together with the protention (e.g. anticipation) of what we are about to do and of what we could have done (from the point of view of the past) establishes the existential coordinates of our cognitive and moral interpretation of our interactional choices. To further explore how this works, I will conclude this essay with a brief discussion of a type of exchange that I witnessed and experienced in (Western) Samoa.

5. Rethinking Rejections

I learned from Samoans a way of dealing with rejections that might help us understand the force of language and its relation to temporality. When Samoans ask for a ride to town, a utensil, a loan, and the like, if their request is denied, they do not necessarily accept or protest. Instead, very typically they silently wait. They just sit there. I observed this behavior on many occasions and also experienced it used on myself as the target of a request. As I later reflected on these experiences I realized that confronted with a nonimmediate reaction to my negative response, I felt compelled to elaborate on my reasons for denying the favor while the Samoan requestor quietly listened. As time went by, in explaining my reasons for saying "no" I would realize that in addition to the just-explained reasons for saying "no" there were also reasons for saying "yes." As these yes-reasons were being considered, they had a chance to acquire momentum, often leading me to undergo a change of disposition, which would result in a reversal of the original position.

In her study of the ways in which speakers deal with the lack of response to an assessment, Pomerantz (1984b) described a similar phenomenon. She argued that silence, even a one-second pause, gives speakers a chance to reconsider what they just said and may have the effect of producing "a rapid and complete reversal of position" (1984b: 161). As a possible explanation for such a change, Pomerantz tentatively suggests that speakers might want to avoid being "undiplomatic or offensive." Without dismissing the face-saving reading of this type of action, I would like to suggest a related and yet different interpretive route.

My hypothesis is that the requestor's silently waiting after being told "no" has one main effect: rather than staying to the side of the requestor (who might have requested something unreasonable or inappropriate under the specific circumstances), the burden of responsibility for the denial moves to the target of the request. It is as if the ride, the money, or whatever else is being asked for is no longer, or is at least not only, what the requesting party needs. With the crucial role played by temporality as the complex interplay of retention and protention, the goal of the requestor can become a goal for the other. Informally speaking, we could say that one person's problem has become the other's problem because while apparently trying to justify the "no," the person who is the target of the request has a chance to evaluate the past, on-going, and future acts in terms of their moral implications for Self, Other, and their common world.

6. Beyond Politeness as Strategic Interaction

If we want to invoke "politeness" in the case I just illustrated, we would have to go beyond the notion of politeness as strategic interaction. Borrowing from Henri Bergson's (2008) classification of three types of "*politesse*," we would then downplay the politeness based on conventions of social engagement (what he calls "politesse des manières") and be inclined to invoke the politeness we exhibit when we overcome our habits and manage to take another person's point of view, thereby imagining what another wishes or needs (what Bergson calls "politesse de l'esprit"). But more than these two types, in the Samoan situation I have just described we would definitely recognize at work what Bergson calls the "politeness of the heart" ("politesse du cœur"), which allows us to sympathize with an Other's troubles and aspirations and become the Other's supporter – the latter being a concept that is hypercognized in Samoan language and culture through the term *tâpua'i* ("supporter" or "sympathizer") and the linguistic practices associated with this term (Duranti and Ochs, 1986).

Bergson's classification can be easily combined with the understanding of the crucial role played by the temporal unfolding of our affective and moral standing. It is the process of "becoming" that needs to be foregrounded. To work, ethics needs time.

Through the waiting and the ensuing explanation/justification, the doing of the first "no" is re-contextualized. Through an affective (i.e. affect-loaded and affect-producing) time that allows people to have a chance to think about and reconsider their own reciprocal positioning, the rejection as a moral act can come to the fore. Borrowing from the work of Levinas, we could say that it is the fact of having to confront the face (*visage*) of the Other, or, rather, the *disappointed* face of the Other, that moves us, that makes us realize that we have a responsibility toward the Other that up to that point we did not have or we were not aware of having. At first, this is a responsibility to justify our actions (our saying "no"). A little later, a broader sense of responsibility may find its way into our reasoning and our discourse and we become responsible not just for a particular act, but for the *destiny* of the Other.

For this to happen, a suspension or break in the habitual, seemingly "natural" flow of things must take place. This is what Husserl would have called a phenomenological modification or, more specifically, a re-orientation (*Umstellung*) (Husserl, 1970). In this case, the force of language is shown by both its presence and its absence, through what happened (what was said) and what did not happen (what was not said). The silence of the Other, the absence of the Other's next turn after our denial/rejection keeps the memory of the request alive and pressing on us. The request changes its performative status: it becomes a moral imperative that we end up telling ourselves. Just like the sound of a note that has been played is retained and yet changes its intensity and status as time passes on (Husserl, 1991), so the absence of speech after the last "no" – regardless of how elaborate the "no" may have become – keeps ringing in our ears, until it

finds a resolution, a different one from what was expected a minute or two earlier. The force of language has shown itself, not as violence, this time, but as an opportunity to be a responsible human being who cares for and identifies with others' needs.

Acknowledgments

This article is a revised version of a paper presented on May 5, 2008 in the seminar "Pratiques langagières: oral et écrit d'hier et d'aujourd'hui," at the Française-Université de Paris III while I was a visiting scholar at the École des Hautes Ètudes en Sciences Sociales. I would like to thank Luca Greco and the students in the seminar for their comments and questions. Earlier drafts of this article benefited from editorial suggestions by Anjali Browning and Jennifer Guzmán and from conversations with Charles Goodwin and Elinor Ochs.

References

Austin, J. L. (1975). in J. O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (eds.), *How to do things with words. 2nd Edition.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. AQ1

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). "Discourse in the novel", in M. Holquist (ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 259–422.

Barthes, R. (1970). "L'ancienne rhéthorique". *Communications* **16**: 172–229.

Bergson, H. (2008). *La Politesse*. Paris: Payot & Rivages.

Bourdieu, P. and T. Eagleton (1994). "Doxa and common life: An interview", in S. Zizek (ed.), *Mapping ideology*. London: Verso, 265–277.

Brenneis, D. L. and F. Myers (eds.) (1984). *Dangerous words: Language and politics in the pacific*. New York: New York University Press.

Brown, P. and S. C. Levinson (1978). "Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena", in E. N. Goody (ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56–289.

Duranti, A. (1999). "Relativity", *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* **9**: 220–222.

Duranti, A. and E. Ochs (1986). "Literacy instruction in a Samoan village", in B. B. Schieffelin and P. Gilmore (eds.), *Acquisition of literacy: Ethnographic perspectives*. Norwood, MA: Ablex, 213–232.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face to face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Goodwin, C. and A. Duranti (1992). "Rethinking context: An introduction", in A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–42.

Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hill, J. H. and B. Mannheim (1992). "Language and world view". *Annual Review of Anthropology* **21**: 381–406.

Emerald_SP-V006_9.indd 70 2/12/2009 6:40:23 AM

Husserl, E. (1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. Translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson. New York: Collier.

Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Husserl, E. (1991). *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time (1893–1917)*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Levinas, E. (1982). *Éthique et Infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Paris: Fayard & France Culture.

Lucy, J. A. (1992). *Language diversity and thought: A reformulation of the linguistic relativity hypothesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Malinowski, B. (1935). *Coral gardens and their magic*. London: Allen & Unwin (2 Volumes).

Pernot, L. (2000). *La Rhétorique dans l'Antiquité*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française.

Pomerantz, A. (1984a). "Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes", in J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 57–101.

Pomerantz, A. (1984b). "Pursuing a response", in J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 152–164.

Raffel, S. H. (2002). "If Goffman had read Levinas". *Journal of Classical Sociology* **2**: 179–202.

Sacks, H. (1987). "On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation", in G. Button and J. R. E. Lee (eds.), *Talk and social organisation, multilingual matters*. England: Clevedon, 54–69.

Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Silverstein, M. (2001). "The limits of awareness", in A. Duranti (ed.), *Linguistic anthropology: A reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Whorf, B. L. (1956). in J. B. Carroll (ed.), *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Emerald_SP-V006_9.indd 72 2/12/2009 6:40:23 AM