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978-0-521-58705-1 - Speakers, Listeners and Communication: Explorations in Discourse Analysis

Gillian Brown

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book is primarily concerned to give an account of how listeners behave as they participate in dialogues in which information is exchanged. What listeners have understood from what a previous speaker has said is frequently revealed in what listeners say themselves when they next take a turn at speaking. We shall examine what listeners say in their turn as speakers, looking for evidence of what they have understood previous speakers as saying. Detailed knowledge of such behaviour is fundamental to the development of our understanding of the cognitive basis of language use.

If we want to make claims about the nature of comprehension processes, we had better be sure that such claims will be widely applicable within the population. The subjects who participated in the dialogues illustrated here are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and are diverse in their academic ability. They are drawn from Edinburgh schools and the University of Edinburgh, as well as from schools in the county of Essex and Essex University. They include young adults and adolescents of demonstrated intellectual ability, as well as 14–16 year-olds who are deemed by their schools to be in the bottom third of the academic ability range.

I am not concerned here to make quantitative claims. Rather, I draw attention to patterns of behaviour which occur repetitively in the data. The intention is to seek to explore the nature of the behaviour rather than to examine its detailed distribution. Even if only a handful of subjects manifests a problem of understanding at a point in the exchange of information where others have apparently no difficulty, this itself may illuminate the process as a whole.

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The dialogues which form the data emerge from tasks where different participants had access to different but related information, which needed to be shared in order for the task to be achieved. The participants spoke freely and as much as they felt that they needed to; thus some groups completed a task in ten minutes which others took forty minutes to fail to complete. All of the dialogues were audio-taped and transcribed. The value of the task structure is that the analyst can identify what is being spoken of, knowing what information was potentially available to the participants, and can compare treatments of the same point of information by different individuals and different groups.

It seems reasonable to suggest that a basic requirement of understanding is the ability to understand reference to persons and things, to understand how they are disposed in space, and to understand how they interact over time. The tasks described here explore these abilities.

The tasks fall into two groups. The first group, called the Map task, is concerned with the identification and spatial relationships of features on maps, where one speaker describes a route to the listener. How much listeners have understood of what the speaker says is to a considerable extent revealed in what the listeners draw on their maps, by what questions they ask, and by the comments that they make as the task proceeds. There are easier and more difficult versions of these spatially structured tasks, which make different cognitive demands on the subjects, differences which are reflected in the language speakers use and the consequent changed demands on the listeners. Of particular interest is the way in which subjects set about constructing the context required to interpret a given utterance.

In the second set of tasks, the Stolen letter tasks, different participants in the same dialogue watch different stretches of the video-recording of a temporally structured series of events, in which it is necessary to distinguish between three characters and to track each of them through the series of events. The participants narrate to each other the action which they have witnessed, and then together try to work out the sequence of the events which they have (a) watched and (b) heard about. The narrative genre requires subjects to retain in memory what they have witnessed and listened to, and to attempt to construct a coherent account of the input from two different modes. This genre elicits a much wider variety of linguistic

forms from speakers, which in turn requires enhanced strategies of interpretation as compared to those which were used in the Map task. In particular, this shift of genre makes it necessary to reformulate the notion of context to accommodate how an utterance must be understood in the narrative mode.

In this study, the listener's role in conversation is emphasised. In chapter 1, I discuss the nature of communication and the notion of the correct interpretation of an utterance. While not denying that there are types of utterance which can demonstrably be correctly or incorrectly interpreted, I suggest that, for most utterances, particularly those which form part of extended discourse, the most we can hope for is adequate interpretation – adequate as seen from the listener's point of view rather than from that of the speaker.

In chapter 2, I consider the range of ways which are currently used to explore the nature of the processes of comprehension and suggest that an additional, complementary, method is required, which would permit an account of fully successful communication and allow us to distinguish this from partially successful, or wholly unsuccessful, communication and would yield, in part at least, an account of the reasons for this range of behaviour. I suggest that the Map task method performs this function, at least for the genres of data examined here, since it obliges participants to cope with combining dissonant information, from an auditory linguistic source and from a visual source, in a plausibly ecological environment (in the sense of Neisser 1976).

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which participants construct and interpret expressions which refer to landscape features in a range of different spatial domains, in the context of considering what it might mean for speaker and listener to think of a referent in a 'pretty similar' way (Evans 1982:316). It shows how listeners who are successful in understanding referring expressions appear to construct a restricted search field within the general context of the Map task. I also show how vague expressions, intended by the speaker to refer, may be taken by the listener, in the absence of a referent, as constitutive of new information.

In chapter 4, I turn to the issue of how, in a spatial domain, the speaker, by the use of deictic (or indexical) expressions, can construct for the listener

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a particular viewpoint, yielding a perspective on what is spoken of which the listener must share with the speaker in order to understand the speaker's utterance.

Chapters 5 and 6 retrace some of the ground covered in chapters 3 and 4, but this time in the context of a temporally structured task, the Stolen letter task. These chapters draw attention to the different demands made upon the listener as soon as we move away from a stable, external representation of the sort that we see in the spatially structured maps, to demand from the listener an ability to combine the memory of episodes watched on a video with a verbal account of a different episode in the same narrative.

In the final chapter, the listener's various roles are the focus of attention, as, using data from both types of tasks, we analyse the way in which a listener behaves in a two-person dialogue as opposed to a four-person dialogue, and show how differently listeners behave when they listen to information which is new to them, rather than overhearing information which they already know. We explore the part played in information exchanges by the establishment of mutual beliefs and we then address, once again, the issue of sentence meaning and speaker intention.

I have focussed in this study on the time/place/person parameters. The data I discuss, particularly that in the Stolen letter task, where subjects attempt to work out the order in which two scenes must have occurred and ascribe intentions to characters in the narrative, offers a rich source of evidence on the types of inferences which listeners draw from what other speakers say in conjunction with what they themselves already know. I had intended to include in this volume a chapter on this topic, but the contents of this putative chapter have grown out of all proportion to the rest of the volume and, it is now clear, must constitute a separate book.

The discourse analyst sits, rather uneasily perhaps, between the semantacist who attempts to give an account of what sentences mean, and the cognitive psychologist who attempts to give an account of how listeners process utterances and texts. The discourse analyst draws on a range of more-or-less well understood theoretical models to attempt to describe listeners' behaviour as they listen to spontaneously produced language which they try to make sense of while attempting to put that understanding to immediate use. The data presented here is, in an obvious sense, artificial and highly

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restricted in type, and should be extrapolated from with caution, since it seems likely that each newly examined genre will throw up characteristics of behaviour which were not manifested in the relatively simple tasks which we investigate here. Nonetheless a careful, qualitative, analysis of the behaviour of listeners, even in banal tasks, should contribute to a better understanding of how listeners actually go about the process of constructing an interpretation, of how they sometimes fail, and why they fail.

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1.1 The nature of communication

How do people use language to communicate with each other? For centuries the commonsense view has been that articulated by Locke: ‘Unless a man’s words excite the same ideas in the hearer which he makes them stand for in speaking he does not speak intelligibly’ ([1689] 1971:262). Locke was himself fully aware of the difficulties of achieving such an ideal, guaranteed, form of communication, but it still claims its adherents in the twentieth century. In the simplest version of this view, the speaker has a thought which is encoded into words and transmitted through the air by sound-waves so that it reaches the listener, who decodes the words and then has the speaker’s thought. Such an account of communication would have little more to say than that it consists of speakers exchanging thoughts (see for instance Shannon & Weaver’s account of signal-information in *Information Theory*, 1949).

Swift parodies such a simplistic view in *Gulliver’s Travels*, where Gulliver describes an even more direct method of ensuring the passage of the same thought. The mathematics master in the Grand Academy of Lagado (Swift’s splenetic version of the Royal Society) requires his students to eat each idea, so that it may progress directly to the brain without any distorting mediation arising from the student’s own contemplation of the idea: ‘the proposition and demonstration were fairly written on a thin wafer, with ink composed of a cephalic tincture. This the student was to swallow upon a fasting stomach, and for three days following eat nothing but bread and water. As the wafer digested, the tincture mounted to his brain, bearing the

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proposition along with it' ([1726] 1960:224). Despite the ingenuity of the method, at the time of writing Gulliver was unable to account the method a success, because of persistent failure on the part of the students to carry out the specified procedures.

Although direct passage of thoughts might seem to offer an ideal system of communication, where sets of expressions with fixed meanings are passed from one mind to another, thus guaranteeing the preservation of the identity of the thoughts associated with the expressions, the problems of such an account have often been pointed out, though rarely more effectively than by Swift. The only systems of human communication which can be described as operating through fixed meanings are relatively limited systems like those used in arithmetic or, to choose a simpler example, like traffic lights. Locke himself observed that, since different individuals had different experiences, they used and understood words in different ways ([1689] 1971:300) – Locke's own use of the term *idea* is a good example of this). He suggested that, as our ideas become more complex and more abstract, the meaning intended by the speaker (which may not be fully clear even to the speaker) is increasingly less likely to be understood in exactly the same way by the hearer.

The traditional response to what was seen as the danger of inefficient communication was to talk of the 'imperfections' of language, as Locke sometimes did ([1689] 1971:299–301). This was a view widely held at the inception of the Royal Society, which was intended to remedy such deficiencies. It is a view still expressed by some scholars today: Herskovitz (1986:192), acknowledging vagueness and inconsistency in the semantics of prepositions in English, speaks of the 'design defects' of language. The difficulties confronting any effort to rationalise the structure or to fix the possible meaning of language, appear to be, in principle, insoluble (and indeed such an outcome, we shall argue, would be undesirable). Nonetheless, throughout the last three hundred years at least, the failure to ensure the passage between minds of an identical thought has been seen as fundamentally dangerous to the basis of human knowledge and, in particular, to scientific knowledge. Frege, for instance, insisted that in order to understand an utterance by person A, which refers to an object, person B must not only identify the same object but must think of it in a particular way – in the

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same way as A, since if B thinks of it in some private way we lose the notion of a public language, and without a public language which conveys meanings which are guaranteed to be interpreted identically by everyone, science is impossible (an issue discussed in Evans 1982:15).

Today, there still remain those who believe that a guaranteed system of communication is possible in a human community, even where individuals have a diversity of experiences, though this view has been extensively challenged in recent years (see the discussion in 1.3). One of the functions of a system of education, which is extended over ten or more years of adolescent life, must be to provide repeated experiences of using particular technical terms in restricted ways within particular subject areas, to ensure, as far as possible, a common usage of such terms for those who are participating in a meaningful discourse, shaping their utterances for others who, they believe, are at that moment thinking of what they are thinking of. As a result of this extended education, we may rely on a commonality of usage among educated laymen of such terms as *stanza*, *molecule*, *tributary*, *multiplication*, *treaty*, *germination*, *convection*, and *clause*. But for the purposes of everyday life, where technical terminology is not at issue, the language available to each of us to describe the great variety of changing experience has hourly to be stretched in new ways, with its potential meanings subtly modified. Ziff (1969:233) writes on the importance of recognising the fact that a natural language 'does not ever have, not even at an arbitrary moment of time, a static fixed store of word-senses'. Rather, the vocabulary of a natural language is continually being recreated, and the range of senses which are available to a particular word is constantly being modified and, at the same time, the range of possible interpretations of each of those senses is itself being modified.

It is important to remember that apparently satisfactory communication may often take place without the listener arriving at a full interpretation of the words used. We would expect that this must be a frequent experience for young children learning the language. A 3 year-old boy listened with apparent enjoyment and comprehension, on several occasions, to a story about 'an enormous turnip'. Some weeks later, in a friend's garden, he pointed to a large acanthus plant which was a good deal taller than he was, and asked *Is that an enormous turnip?* Note that he had understood enough of the

meaning of the phrase – that it was a very large plant with big leaves which grows in the garden – to make sense of the story, which did not hinge on ‘the turnip-ness’ of turnips, whatever that may be. He may or may not have understood that turnips have edible roots below the ground. What he was apparently seeking to do was to relate the meaning of this unanchored, partially understood phrase which he had retained in memory, to the real world containing this plant, whose strikingly large size had brought to mind the familiar phrase.

It is not only small children who carry partial information about the relationship between quite familiar words and the objects that these words may appropriately be used to describe. Quine (1960:125) remarks that ‘Vagueness is a natural consequence of the basic mechanism of word learning’ and he goes on to suggest that a general term which denotes physical objects ‘will be vague in two ways: as to the several boundaries of all its objects and as to the inclusion or exclusion of marginal objects’ (ibid.:126). He takes as an example the term *mountain* and points out, as an example of the first kind of vagueness, that it will generally be unclear where a mountain begins and ends. He goes on to suggest that it will be difficult to determine a cut-off point between what is called *a mountain* and what is called *a hill*, a difficulty which exemplifies the second kind of vagueness.

In addition to the types of vagueness of which Quine writes, which appear to be inherent in categorisation, listeners are sometimes able to interpret a given expression in one context of use which, on another occasion, they cannot adequately interpret. Many adults are able to understand utterances containing expressions such as *beech*, *elm*, *sycamore* or *aspen* quite adequately in many contexts, but would be embarrassed if they were asked to pick out the photograph of ‘a sycamore’ from a set of ten photographs of different trees. Putnam (1975) remarks that since he cannot distinguish between an instance of ‘elm’ and an instance of ‘beech’, his personal conceptualisation of both of them must be identical, as either of the expressions will call to mind some sort of undifferentiated deciduous tree. (But Jackendoff (1983:145) points out that if Putnam were told that a particular tree was a beech, he would at least know that it could not also be an elm.) It certainly seems to be the case that, for large areas of experience, many of us must operate with words related to vague prototypes which bear only an

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insecure relation to things in the world. I know many pairs of quite familiar words whose senses are (I think) similar but distinct, where I would have problems distinguishing between the entities that they conventionally denote – such words as *bulldog* and *mastiff*, *pewter* and *britannia metal*, *paraffin* and *methyated spirits*, *rook* and *crow*, *judo* and *karate* would be examples. Nonetheless, on a particular occasion of use I expect to be able to understand an utterance containing one of these expressions, particularly if there is only one relevant type of object present in the context.

In such cases, a qualified expert, whose education and experience have been specialised in the relevant area, could tell us how to distinguish the members of the pair reliably. But we also know a great many words which are not always reliably deployed to make consistent distinctions in the world, and perhaps in principle cannot be reliably deployed. Labov, in a well-known experiment, asked subjects to label a set of shapes varying in the dimensions of height and width, using the terms *bowl*, *cup* or *vase*. No-one had any difficulty with naming the prototypical shapes, but the intermediate forms were judged variably, and judgments could be swayed in one direction or another by the uses to which the container was put (Labov 1973). This outcome seems to exemplify Quine's second kind of vagueness. Jackendoff (1983) remarks that we would hardly expect an expert to rule on whether or not something is correctly identified as a *puddle* or a *pebble*. Similarly Fillmore has discussed the domestic conditions under which today one might judge someone to be a *widow*. Is someone who is divorced, whose former husband has just died, now a *widow*? Suppose she has married again and has become the *wife* of the second husband, is she nonetheless to be considered to be the *widow* of the first? (Fillmore 1982, see also Lakoff 1987). We may claim to know the meaning of a word but it does not follow that we always deploy it in a consistent and reliable manner. This is an issue which we shall return to in later chapters.

We have noted that the genre which has traditionally been seen to be most threatened by the imperfections of language is factual discourse involving the exchange of information, particularly in the sciences. However, partial understanding is obviously an issue which is relevant not only to scientific discourse at some far-removed professional level, but to us all. In everyday life, each of us has a lively interest in the correct passage of