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. But 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 actions of the others.

How could we identify and classify these in a way that could lead to rules for control act forms?
tually psychologists have a long history of paying attention to language.

The level of attention 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, while code takes rather easily. Indeed, code and a command are like requests. Indeed, "Do you want to play outside?" could be either an offer or a question.

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, unify discrepancies, judge reliability by the extent of agreement, and put assurance on deviants to raise the reliability of their coding. High reliability signifies a good group process, but it may not tell us very much about what we need to have, which is translatable, indeed reversibility, between coding levels. For example, if we code for classes in English for at least six classes such as articles, and prepositions, and conjunctions, a coder can only play a fine list. Along with a knowledge of sequential rules of English it is possible then to reconstruct possible sentences, to go from the abstract to the particular case again. Unless we can do that, unless we know enough in the rules of choice in performance, we have lost a lot of information when 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 re not much to do with each other. On the one hand are linguists and philosophers who have been puzzled by the fact that the same utterance can mean different things depending on the context (Searle 1969, Gordon and Kallok 1975). They did little - devise rules of interpretation so that they can find out what others mean when people speak. We are interested in such social meanings as assertion, coordinator, solidarity, distance, anger and affection. We have noticed that the purpose in terms of instrumental transactions can be achieved by quite different means, the means conveying various social implications. Clearly these means must be merged.

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Yet the difference between these situations is not in the actions. It is in the relative skills of the speaker and hearer. There are a number of assumptions about disagreement. That speakers do not always agree is certainly not surprising, and requests are not surprising. Indeed, "Do you want to play outside?" could be either an offer or a question.

Notice that people could be very clear about whether they meant offers, commands, or requests. They could say "Cut the 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 conversation. The landlady will hear the request to move the trash can. How can this be when the will be "Can you move the trash can over here?" The pronoun occurs. Note that the conventional request for unexpected services will be interpreted as an action. How can the student hear this as an implying action for him? In English, Doctors say "We'll take his temperature at midnight," even when they will not be able to nap. Hence if the student regarded himself as subordinate he would hear the

Suppose he says to the landlady "Can we move the trash can over here?" The landlady will hear the request to move the trash can. So, in the first example it is the speaker who is not to do the action. How to her landlady, "Can we move the dust bin over here?" Intending a polite request, She heard a permission request which would have been appropriate from a student.

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

Each of these examples conveys two potential messages: you move the dustbin + you are inferior or I move the dustbin if you allow it + you are superior.

In each of these cases there is also a further social message. In the first case it is to imply social distance. This is a typical form for superiors or to especially when under observation. Children themselves have quite clear rank, not be given such a form by a child except perhaps in role play. If we had clear messages about the action wanted we would have imperatives like relationships they might be statements like "I can do better," or "You're
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in that thinks we ought to foreground social meanings explicitly all the
tead of confounding social messages with other transactions. The point
t of the reason why we include social messages in the
ted in the transactions desired, and let the other dimension remain in the
ty all to the actions desired, and let the other dimension remain in the
nd in this system we jointly signal both what we want and many social
l times. We cannot help indicating adult/child, adult/adult, superior,
ad times, through our choice of means to convey speech
non, strange/unin at all times, through our choice of means to convey speech

ich, our choices can convey anger, affection or sarcasm. "Could you
ive me the staples?" to a near peer is sarcastic or funny. This percep-
re why there can be chronic communication problems in some
for instance, a particular speaker may use forms which convey greater
ally, a person who acts "I should have thought the
street Post Office is closer". The result will be that her control
be heard as she means them. Her hints will not be heard as directives.
entences to be read as questions. Her statements of intent will be
r permission requests. These differences are chronic and regular.
so, of making their directives less explicit than others in this country.

sex differences too. Women use more distancing or deferential forms to
r for men, but mothers receive these less often from children than
or, at least in some middle-class American samples. We are not sure how
this is.

: effect is this. In the course of our everyday transactions we do not say
what we mean, but we outline or collapse several dimensions of meaning at
If we take the perspective of instrumental interaction, in which we use
people to act, we find that we cannot tell what action is wanted, in some
we, without making assumptions about rank, distance, normal social roles
as, the natural categories we talk about these interactions with, such
ething, ordering, offering, all rely for differentiation on social fea-
ng the right to refuse, degrees of control or levels of assumed rela-
ill. And then, because these acts threaten the fact of others and incom-
e them, we build repayments and hedges into the moves we make. These
no matter how explicit the act itself, make clear our social calibration
h, this system makes it possible to convey changes in two ways. One is
the selection of acts themselves. The other is through the verbal
ations. The deviation of these from the listener's expectations identifies
r, deference and so on. For such a system to be learned, and to allow
ation. These differences in form were regularly related to social propen-
like relative rank, age, normal responsibilities, and the cost or importance
demand. The dimensions appeared to correspond to those we had seen so
ine systems of address.

Next we moved to videotaping naturalistic conversations in families. Our pur-
was to identify the contribution of non-verbal communication to social, preceding con-
able to follow the development of the complexity of the system at different ages.
also, we thought there might be enough diversity of age and role within the fami-
This work confirmed our less systematic observations that by the middle of the
They do not make requests the same way to all of them. They are also sensitive
primarily takes the form of explicit elaboration to superior and outsiders, but
of strategies. My favourite example is not my own but from Catherine
O.K.", "Can I drive your car?"

This illustrates a rather extreme defensiveness shifting both the pronouns and the
by the addresses.

We also observed that the normal, unmarked form for directives by parents was
different from family to family. One must know what this form is to identify
addressee or else risk giving unknown messages to another.

In trying to identify the purposes of the actions in each activity, we began to
realize that exactly the same action could be the target of different types of
it, often from more and so on. Our decision as to which was the more natural to
cause these social assumptions expressed in the relationship seem. By
other people, the acts them-
way for small children to establish conversations, to compete atten-
us. We found that usually it was much more difficult for the youngest children in the
they find a way to enter and attract the focus of others. Adults too, of

A large part of our effort has been in developing situated comprehension and sub-
actors for the rank, age and so on, when whether people have a speaker
frequency of some acts, and from the form the acts take. This would make sense of wish and
existence, in the number of directives per se is not important. For
expected and suitable, and if the acts to be carried out must be specified. A more

we tried also to find out if children heard as directives statements and questions
ot, what we found with very early the children made practical interactions
family life is highly predictable. Their actions depended on their ability to
their interaction. In fact what people said in
portion was enough to get them to change their actions when no act was mentioned.

So if someone was looking for a worker, and said, "Is the checker there?" children
would return the checker because they said the speaker needed it. It is not

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question implied a request. We have had to conclude that a large
interaction moves smoothly because cooperative partners are affected by
information without making active efforts to infer intent.

3. It has been demonstrated that the deeper realization patterns as well as the
politeness formulae may be quite different in different communities. What
respect we see as they seem to in language learning and initially do their mapping at

Native speakers appear to realize and interpret the acts we have been studying. We
would expect to find chronic misunderstandings and misperceptions of social
acts. The problem becomes more acute in scenes where what is necessary is
situationally used needs across languages. Most 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,
ones between groups can exist at any of these levels.

Attention has been directed at group differences, at assimilation and
What I have drawn attention to is that language also does social acts, and sys-
social acts and their verbal realization - how do we do things with words - can show
then. A learner to attend to particular social dimensions. So the
see the principle means by which the social system is learned and reinforced.

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