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The Problem of Solutions: Two Cautionary Cases for Applying Conversation Analysis to Business[1]

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More and more, linguists are being asked to exploit their knowledge of language structure and use for an increasing variety of "real-life" purposes. This paper presents two cases in which the author's knowledge about conversational structure and meaning was applied to different aspects of business telephone calls. Discussion of these two informal experiments in applying conversation analysis to business focuses a number of ethical and practical issues, including questions of proprietary rights to linguistic knowledge, control of access to that knowledge, and responsibility for its use. More practically, and of theoretical interest, these cases point out an apparent paradox for and potential "Achilles heel" of at least some exploitations of linguistic knowledge: The advantage gained by such knowledge seems to diminish to the extent that it is exploited.

At this stage in my consideration of these issues, my argument consists of anecdotal evidence from two informal case studies, a hypothesis which this evidence suggests, and discussion of some of the implications of that hypothesis. But the hypothesis (although tentative) is worth consideration because, if accurate, it would affect the work and status of applied linguists quite directly.

To date, some, perhaps many, applications of linguistic theory to problems in the real world seem to have fallen short of the hopes of appliers and clients alike (although frequently the hopes and subsequent disappointments of the two groups have differed). Sometimes this is because the theory being applied is—at the time of application—descriptively and/or explanatorily flawed or incomplete. Enthusiastic applications of the early transformational theories of the 1960s to language teaching come to mind.

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Sometimes the fault lies not so much in the theory but in the process of application—for example, due to the appliers' inadequate consideration of the context of application. Some of the attempts to incorporate Black Vernacular English into the curriculum that have met with resistance from African-American parents and educators might serve as an example of this sort of shortcoming.

But in contrast to these cases, in which one assumes that a more descriptively and explanatorily adequate theory or an ethnographically informed approach would improve the results, there appears to be an inherent problem in another kind of application of linguistic knowledge—one which has been motivated by and has sought to address a wide variety of real-life interpersonal problems and needs. These applications consist principally of making non-linguists aware of some aspect of language use or structure—some part of their *own* communicative competence—in order that they may exploit that awareness, either for personal advantage or for "improved communication." Applications of this sort are legion, and range from quasi-linguistic self-improvement texts to well-researched articles and books by linguists whose descriptive or explanatory arguments can be (and often are) interpreted as having a prescriptive message.

THE PARADOX OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

The apparent paradox of at least some of this kind of linguistic application is that the strategic advantage gained by the exploitation of linguistic awareness—specifically conscious awareness of some aspects of the speaker's own communicative competence—may diminish to the extent that it is exploited. If this is in fact the case, then it would seem to solve some of the ethical dilemmas posed by such applications, but at the expense of limiting the applicability of linguistics. That is, to the extent that our application works—especially to the extent that it works to someone's advantage and to someone else's *dis*advantage, applied linguists face possible ethical dilemmas, some of which are raised below. But to the extent that our applications contain within them the seeds of their own undoing, to the extent that the advantage they create diminishes with use, or even backfires, we face a different

kind of ethical question and a threat to the potential of such applications.

The two cases presented below offer anecdotal evidence of the hypothesized "paradox of diminishing returns" and provide a context for a discussion of some of the ethical issues inherent in new linguistic applications.

CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE

On a number of occasions, as part of trying to explain to family, friends, and acquaintances what linguistics is and what a linguist does and knows, I've talked about some of the research done by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) on the conventional structure of conversation and how conversations "mean" more and rely on more information than is propositionally communicated, especially through the conventional structure of adjacency pairs. In particular, some of Schegloff's research (1972; 1979) focuses on the structure of telephone call openings and exemplifies the conventional but subconscious function of adjacency pairs in negotiating identification and conversational roles of interlocutors. I suppose I chose to discuss this piece of research because of its relevance to the lives of the people I've tried to explain linguistics to, its relative simplicity and transparency to non-linguists, and because I feel it exemplifies fairly clearly some of the important theoretical constructs of linguistics—structure, use, systematicity, conventionality, normative behavior, and the notion of meaning as more than just propositional content—although my choice at the time was not so deliberate.

This research pointed out (and here I oversimplify drastically) that the interpretations of meaning that white middle-class Americans must be making and relying on in conversation can be understood if a pair-wise structure of the sort simplified in Figure 1 is posited, and, therefore, that knowledge of this pair-wise structure must be a part of white middle-class Americans' communicative competence. The adjacent status of pair-members is a function of the conditional relevance projected by the first pair part upon the second pair part (that is, the first utterance constrains the possible interpretations and interactional functions which the second utterance may be conventionally understood to have or serve), and

this conventional knowledge is also a part of a white middle-class American's communicative competence.

Figure 1: (Simplified) Prototypical Structure of Telephone Call Openings (after Schegloff, 1972)

1A Caller: [RING]

1B Callee: Hello

2A Caller: Identification of Self/Callee

2B Callee: Identification of Self

3A Caller: Phatic Communion

3B Callee: Phatic Communion

4A Caller: Reason for Call

. . .

According to Schegloff, the first adjacency pair in a typical telephone call opening negotiates interlocutors' availability to talk. The second pair negotiates interlocutors' respective identities (and may, of course, take more than one actual "pair" of utterances). The third pair (which, again, may take more than one actual "pair" of utterances) is devoted to phatic communion ("How are you?" "Fine, How're you doing?" etc.), after which, the caller states the reason for his or her call, under an obligation incurred and presupposed by the caller's initial summons of the callee to the phone.

As part of the case for the construct of conditional relevance, Schegloff makes the important point that the *absence* of any component of this structure means something; it indexes, constrains, and calls into play particular aspects of the context of talk. For example, the absence of one side of the identification sequence implies familiarity and the absence of any explicit identification implies intimacy. The absence of phatic communion (along with

other contextual information available to the interlocutors) can imply, for example, urgency or frequency of interaction, and so on.

On two occasions, businessmen to whom I have explained this structure have sought to exploit the knowledge which Schegloff made explicit.

Case 1: My friend, whom I'll call Don, is a partner in a small business consulting firm. At any given time, he is most actively working for about six clients, looking for companies for them to buy, or for other companies to buy or finance his clients' businesses. His clients frequently call him with a question or suggestion, but mainly, he says, "to have their hands held." One evening he was complaining about how much of his day was "wasted" holding his clients' hands. He then challenged me to prove the relevance of the field of linguistics to the real world by providing a solution to his problem: Minimizing the number or length of these kinds of calls from clients while still making them feel that he was working hard enough for them. I responded by telling him about the pair-wise structure of telephone call openings and, more or less off the top of my head, suggesting the following modification of that structure in order to assume control over these kinds of phone calls. (I've reconstructed my suggestion below to capture its tone.)

"In a normal call that you answered yourself, you would go through the normal sequence of identification and 'How are yous' that would place your caller in the position and under the obligation to explain his purpose for calling, letting him set the agenda of the call. However, you have a secretary who answers your phone. Your secretary puts the client who's calling on hold, buzzes through to you on the intercom to tell you that Bill Smith is on Line 2, and you take the call. The intervening participation of your secretary presents you with an opportunity to preempt control of the call.

"Both you and your client already know who you're talking to; identification has already been taken care of. When you take the call, you have to speak first in order for the caller to know you're on the line—and this is your chance. Rather than begin with phatic talk which would lead to your client's explanation of why he called, take a moment before picking up the phone to think of what you've done on the client's account recently or some question that you 'need' to ask him, and begin with that. For example, 'Hi Bill, I'm glad you

called. We just finished . . .' or 'Hi Bill, your timing is great. I needed to ask you . . .'.

"There are several messages sent by this 'violation' of normal phone call opening structure and 'etiquette.' First, it says to your client that you're thinking about him, that he was on the tip of your mind. At the same time, the violation of the normal phone call opening sequence communicates an air of urgency to your information or question for the client, implying that the client and your work for him are important to you. This will go a long way toward repaying him for the loss or delay of the 'How are yous' that you skipped. Second, it lets you set the agenda and take care of some of your business before the client asks his 'What have you done for me lately?' question—while at the same time demonstrating exactly what you have done for him lately. Later in the phone call, once you've settled your own agenda and communicated the importance of your client to you, you can ask him what he called about and do some phatic communion."

For several months Don used this strategy quite frequently and, he thought, to excellent effect. He even kept a set of three-by-five cards by his phone which he updated regularly with a status report and questions for each client. He thought it made him sound busy—but on the client's behalf—and made these kinds of calls more efficient for him. He even reported to me an interesting side effect of the strategy: Because his clients often just wanted to be reassured that Don was thinking about them and his preemption had already answered this question, when he disingenuously "corrected himself" ("Oh, sorry Bill, what were you calling about?"), they often fell back on a phatic excuse, which frequently included a social invitation. This, in turn, Don said, enhanced his personal relationship with his clients; he said he had never received so many invitations to parties, ski weekends, and the like. Clients knew they were supposed to have a reason for calling, and once that reason was preempted, an invitation or some other personal agenda was the excuse they often fell back on.

However, after a few months, Don started to curtail his use of this phone strategy. He intuitively realized that such a strategy only works if it is the exception, not the norm. He felt that to preempt his clients' phone call agendas all the time would either make them angry, make him seem strange or rude, or at least become what they expected from him and so lose its implicative potential. Fortunately, Don realized the potential "downside" of the

strategy before it began to hurt his business. Don intuited what I, as a linguist, should have known: The meaning of the marked choice lies (in large part) in its relative infrequency compared to the unmarked choice. So, to generalize, my advice was of most value the less frequently it was used. And the more frequently it was used, the more likely it became that it would lose its efficacy, or worse, backfire and send inappropriate, negatively evaluated messages.

Case 2: I also told another friend of mine (call him Rob) about phone call opening structure; just the descriptive facts—no strategy, no overt advice. (Rob owns a company which manufactures valves of some sort for jet engines.) A year later Rob took me out to dinner and told me that on the strength of my "advice" (his word) he had invested in a phone voice mail and data entry/retrieval system for his company. This is the kind of system being used by more and more companies and government agencies: Recorded messages tell you to push 1 for this kind of information, push 2 for something else, enter your account number to retrieve certain kinds of information, etc. In Rob's case, his clients' purchasing agents could access all sorts of information about their accounts, payments and balances, shipping dates, and so on—all without talking to a human being. He enthusiastically explained that his sales personnel were now freed from much of the time-consuming job of socializing and account maintenance with purchasing agents. They were able to devote their new-found free time to "cold calls" to prospective new clients and were thereby increasing his sales volume. He even said that he thought I could get as much as $500 per person with a well-marketed seminar for business people which offered this information and more of its kind! He also mentioned that this argument for phone data retrieval systems had not been made to him by the phone company.

I told my friend that I was concerned because while it may be efficient in one sense to cut out the social functions of conversation, especially between a salesperson and a purchasing agent with a preexisting personal relationship (built up over months or years of phatic communion in the course of phone calls), I worried about what would happen when the identity of salesperson or purchasing agent changed and a personal relationship no longer existed. For example, what effect would the new phone system have on account maintenance when the client wasn't confident that

behind the phone data system there was a real person who could be trusted if there was a serious problem? My friend acknowledged my concern, but had already paid thousands of dollars for his new phone system.

To make a long story short, he recently called to tell me that his phone data system was getting less and less use because his sales force, responding to clients' complaints *and their own needs* to "be in touch" with clients, had begun to circumvent it precisely to maintain a personal relationship with their clients. The length of account maintenance calls was back up, and the number of cold calls had decreased correspondingly.

In summary, these two cases suggest that at least some stable conventions of language use reassert themselves after intervention, that the unmarked/marked normative relation tends to seek its own level. The exploitation of linguistic awareness seems to have provided only short-term gains, with a significant downside potential (in business parlance). Furthermore, this sort of strategic use of language can seemingly work only as a secret; the more widely known the strategy, the more ambiguous and suspect the message inferable from its use. (This, it seems to me, is the downfall of many strategies espoused in, for example, popular assertiveness training seminars and books; if I suspect that your assertive behavior is a conscious strategy, I may doubt the sincerity of that behavior—and even whether you are really an assertive person.)

My purpose in describing these cases is not to claim discovery of a new application of conversation analysis, nor even discovery of a problem for that application. In fact, the day after I presented a talk on this subject I was shown a story entitled "Voice mail taps wrath of callers" on the front page of *USA Today*'s Money section, which gave several examples of "a growing disenchantment with the technology," which is used by "[a]bout 85% of *Fortune 500* companies and 2 million smaller companies." The story presents a number of complaints made about voice mail and ends with the opinion of a receptionist that "I can make or break sales that come into this company by speaking directly to the people that call, by trying to console them . . . I don't think a machine can do that. It's a very cold way of dealing with people" (*USA Today*, March 2, 1992). My intent is to offer a hypothesis—the paradox of diminishing returns—which may explain these kinds of problems,

and raise some of the ethical and theoretical issues which these data suggest.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

These informal cases present a number of ethical questions, a few of which I will raise without presuming to answer, hoping to spark discussion, not settle it.

First, how can linguists avoid the use of linguistic knowledge about everyday interaction for ends of which we don't approve? *Can* we constrain applications in this way (since, for example, we cannot reliably anticipate all possible future uses)? Consider the possibility of criminals studying linguistic defenses to criminal conspiracy charges in order to discover how to maintain the necessary ambiguity in their conspiratorial negotiations. I am not suggesting that we should not try to apply linguistics to various kinds of social problems or needs; one of the values of and justifications for science is, I believe, the technological advances it can enable. In fact, the question of control of applications is often a moot point since, as in the cases described above, the products of our research are in the public domain and can be used by other linguists or non-linguists according to their own motivations and understanding of that research.

Second, if linguists *are* willing for linguistic knowledge to be used for the personal advantage of one speaker or group of speakers in relation to others, how do we decide, on a principled basis, to whom we give this knowledge? To right historical inequities? To level a particular social, economic or political playing field? Even if we are guided by some ethical, social or political motivation to apply some aspect of our knowledge to a particular social, economic or political problem, we face the further question of which participant(s) in that problem area to offer that knowledge to. For example, Gumperz (e.g., 1982) most directly addressed his work on cross-cultural miscommunication, or "crosstalk," between native and nonnative speakers of British English to the native speakers, in part because of their position as the dominant group and their role as gatekeepers in British society, on the explicit belief that native speakers' understanding of native-nonnative differences in communicative norms would minimize native speakers' negative

evaluations of nonnative speakers on the basis of their communicative behavior. But the altruism of all members of any group cannot be relied on, and some might exploit their newfound knowledge for purposes in direct conflict with the scientist's intentions (as demonstrated, for example, by Ryan, 1976).

Related to the question of who we should inform is the question of whether we even have the right to decide who should get this knowledge, especially since the kind of knowledge I'm talking about is communicative competence, which is *already* something the speaker "owns" and uses, albeit presumably in a less than conscious way. Linguistics is different from physics (and similar to, for example, psychology) in that while a clearer understanding of the nature of gravity is unlikely to cause any but the most self-conscious of laypersons to stumble, a clearer understanding of *only a part* of one's own communicative competence may cause a speaker to change her communicative behavior in ways that may have consequences which are unforeseen (and perhaps unforeseeable) by the layperson or the linguist. This is especially likely because of the interdependence of all aspects of the communicative system (intra- and interpersonal). The research on crosstalk mentioned above raises further ethical questions since it makes available to speakers not only knowledge about their own communicative competence but knowledge about the communicative competence of others which may be exploited for one speaker's or group's advantage and to the disadvantage of another speaker or group. In general, if, how, and where the line between the goals of personal advantage and of improved communication can be drawn raises its own questions of ethical relevance.

Third, once a linguist has decided to offer a particular application to some person or persons, who is responsible for the consequences (especially any negative consequences) of that application? What "prerequisites" of other relevant or necessary knowledge must be required to ensure correct or effective application? We frequently require our students to learn some linguistic constructs in order to understand others; is this less necessary for non-linguists? If so, then presumably the linguist has designed the application in such a way as to obviate the necessity of that otherwise prerequisite knowledge for the application's target population and purpose. But how can this be done? In anticipation of unforeseen consequences (which are nearly certain given our incomplete understanding of language and its use), what kind of

warnings or disclaimers should the linguist offer? Or are we to follow the rule of the marketplace: *Caveat emptor*?

Of course, in those cases, if any, where the hypothesis of the paradox of diminishing returns proves accurate (i.e., that the advantage gained by the exploitation of at least some linguistic awareness diminishes as it is exploited), then to some extent these ethical dilemmas are eventually resolved for us by the language's natural system of checks and balances, but at the expense of the applicability or practical value of this kind of linguistic knowledge.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the hypothesis of the paradox of diminishing returns is supported by empirical evidence beyond the anecdotes I have offered here, we face some interesting and potentially important theoretical questions. There exist numerous natural conventions of language use in the real world which work to the advantage of some speakers and to the disadvantage of others and that do *not* seem to diminish with frequency of use (e.g., the whole range of ways in which various uses of language exert the dominance of one speaker over another and serve to maintain historical power relations between groups of speakers). First, how do these natural language use strategies differ from artificial strategies of the kind described above? For example, the artificial strategies discussed above are marked in terms of relative frequency of use, whereas the markedness of many natural language use strategies relates to the social identity of the speaker. Investigation of these differences may contribute to our understanding of different kinds of markedness and their relations to processes of dominance and power. Second, how do natural strategies maintain their efficacy, in apparent contrast to artificial strategies? Would the efficacy be mitigated if the linguistic mechanisms by which they structurally and contextually index and enact power relations were exposed, especially to those who are dominated (in part) through these strategies (as seems to be the case with artificial strategies)? For example, heightened awareness of gendered language forms and structures has institutionalized explicit consideration of the gender roles and relations which language indexes. Finally, perhaps even these more stable, natural language use strategies share with their artificial

counterparts what my friend Don called a cost-benefit ratio, and if so, investigation of these costs and benefits will help us to understand more clearly the bidirectional nature of the negotiation of conversational and social power.

Finally, the preceding discussion offers a new perspective on the value of considering ethical issues in applying linguistics. Often in science, ethical considerations are viewed as a constraint on research design which can even render some questions unanswerable. The preceding discussion suggests that ethical considerations, in addition to their costs to linguistic research and applications, can also produce benefits, leading linguists to ask new questions about language and even suggesting new ways of answering them.

NOTES

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Seattle, Washington, 1992.

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