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UNDERSTANDING IN FACE-TO-FACE DISCOURSE: CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS REVISITED

We consider understanding in face-to-face discourse as a dynamic cooperative activity in which interlocutors are actively engaged in the referring and inferring processes. We might as well think of reference as an act in which the speaker uses linguistic forms to enable the listener to identify something while inference implies recognition of the speaker's intention by the listener (i.e. the listener's ability to infer correctly which entity the speaker intends to identify by using particular referring expression). Thus, successful discourse is necessarily interactional, with both the speaker and the listener having to understand what the other has in mind. In 1975 Paul Grice worked out conversational maxims and implicatures based on the cooperative principle. These maxims being focused on the speaker's communicative strategies, we offer some rules of inference that might be viewed as the listener's strategies focused on achieving understanding in face-to-face discourse.

Reference, then, is clearly tied to the speaker's goals (e.g. to identify something) and beliefs (i.e. can the listener be expected to know that particular something?) in the use of language. For successful reference to occur, we must also recognize the role of inference. Because there is no direct relationship between entities and words, the listener's task is to infer correctly which entity the speaker intends to identify by using particular referring expression. It is not unusual for people to want to refer to some entity or person without knowing exactly which "name" would be the best word to use. We can even use vague expressions (such as: "the blue thing", "that icky stuff"), relying on the listener's ability to infer what referent we have in mind.

In his book *"Mutual Misunderstanding"* Taylor asserts that many of the prominent theories concerning understanding argue that communication assumes shared understanding (Taylor, 1992). This assumption is either based on a naturalistic and common sense view that if there is shared understanding, there is communication or a behavioristic view that people act as if they understand each other and this is quite enough to say that they do. The communicants interact and in doing so they work towards some degree of mutual understanding.

While analyzing understanding, we take it for granted that there is always a chance for misunderstanding, and that both understanding and misunderstanding are found in social and cultural differences and power relations which structure face-to-face discourse. At the same time it is unanimously assumed that speakers and listeners involved in conversation are usually cooperating with each other.

Thus, face-to-face discourse, is rule governed. The structure of a conversation is identified, focusing on the devices for managing the interaction and constructing joint meaning. Relationships are made, maintained and broken through talk. So linguistics provides a concrete way of understanding how these relationships are made, maintained and broken. Conversation can be defined as a "turn-taking game". As Wardhaugh points out, "once you have acquired the turn to speak, you have a strong right to continue speaking until you voluntarily give up the turn" (Wardhaugh, 1985: 150) As interruption is usually a "violation of another's territory of rights," speakers will organize their discourse to prevent interruption.

In 1975 Paul Grice proposed a theory about how people should use language. Grice's suggestion is that there is a set of rules guiding the conversation. They arise, it seems, from basic rational considerations and may be formulated as guidelines for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation. Grice identifies four **maxims of conversation**, which jointly express a general **cooperative principle**. These principles are expressed as follows (Grice, 1975: 46):

The cooperative principle:
Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk in which you are engaged.

The maxim of Quality:
Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically:

(i)   Do not say what you believe to be false.

(ii)   Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim Quantity:

(i)   Make your contribution as informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange.

        (ii)   Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of Relevance:
Make your contribution relevant.

The Maxim of Manner:

(i)   Avoid obscurity.   (iii)   Be brief.

(ii)   Avoid ambiguity.   (iv)   Be orderly.

Grice's maxims specify what the communicants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, cooperative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly while providing sufficient information. This theory has been argued since then by some linguists on the assumption that it describes a philosopher's paradise as no one actually speaks like that the whole time. But Grice's point is subtly different. He doesn't expect that people follow these guidelines to the letter. As Levinson explains, "in most ordinary kinds of talk when the conversation doesn't proceed according to their specifications, hearers assume that, contrary to appearances, these principles are nevertheless being adhered to at some deeper level" (Levinson, 1997: 127). An example should make it clear:

A: Where is Bill?

B: There's a yellow VW outside Sue's house.

At first sight, B's answer seems non-cooperative, having violated at least the maxims of Quantity and Relevance. Yet, it is clear that despite this apparent failure of these conversational maxims, we try to interpret B's utterance as cooperative on the basis of the information which is implied in the subtext. To be more precise, we arrive at the suggestion that, if Bill has a yellow VW, he might be in Sue's house. It is this kind of inference that Grice views as **conversational implicature**. So Grice's point is not that we always adhere to these maxims on a superficial level but rather that, wherever possible, people will interpret what we say as conforming to the maxims on at least some level. However, the reason for linguistic interest in the maxims is that they generate inferences beyond the semantic content of the sentences uttered. It is important to recognize these maxims as unstated assumptions we have in face-to-face discourse.

Leech extends Grice's theory of cooperation. He complements the Cooperative Principle by an Irony and Politeness Principles with maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. At the end of the book, Leech alludes to cross-cultural comparisons of communicative activity, but implies that the differences are due to strategies, not principles (Leech, 1983: 213).

In fact, the maxims worked out by Grice and his followers are focused on the communicative strategies of the speaker who tries to be cooperative, thus ensuring the listener's understanding. But understanding is a difficult psycholinguistic phenomenon. It can be achieved only on the basis of the mutually cooperative communication involving competitive efforts both of the speaker and of the listener. Since the appearance of Grice's work a number of interesting researches has been carried out, particularly, by American scholars that are mainly devoted to the study of communicative strategies of the speaker while the listener's role in achieving understanding still calls for a special linguopragmatic analysis. At present, the theory of discourse analysis has developed to such a degree, that its data not only encourage us to undertake some efforts to investigate the listener's communicative strategies, but also enable us to work out some of the cooperative principles, aimed at achieving understanding in face-to-face discourse.

We base our research on the following theory. Understanding is closely connected with context. It is difficult to define the term "context" in a general way. Duranti and Goodwin suggest four dimensions of context (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992):

1. **Setting:** the social and physical framework in which interactions are set and which is continuously created in the talk itself. So, for example, the housing interview or estate agent encounter is in some ways "there" at the outset but is also constructed by the question and answer sequences which characterize it.

2. **Behavioural environment:** the non-verbal communication and use of social space in an encounter.

3. **Language as context:** the way in which language calls up contexts and itself provides contexts for other talk.

4. **Extrasituational context:** wider social, political and cultural institutions and discourses.

Contextual information is frequently potential rather than explicit. In other words, it does not appear as readily available to interlocutors and / or is not necessarily relevant and therefore attended to at any time. So such information will have more or less marked traces on the surface across large stretches of discourse and may emerge according to the interlocutors' orientation. According to Gumperz, contextualization is the means by which speakers and listeners construct local meaning and relate it to the wider context of knowledge, values and assumptions. Gumperz defines contextualization cues as "constellations of surface features of message form, the means by which speakers signal and listeners interpret what the activity is, how semantic content is to be understood and how each sentence relates to what precedes or follows (Gumperz, 1999: 131)." Context within an interaction is not some fixed set of features, but is dynamic and liable to change. It is reflexive: language shapes context as much as context shapes language. This notion of context in its turn rests on two basic assumptions: 1) that interactions are inherently ambiguous, and 2) that in order to interpret an interaction it is necessary to create it. The ambiguity of interactions implies that any utterance can be understood in a number of ways and decisions how to interpret it are based on the notions of expectation and on the surface features of interaction as they are processed. However, the act of interpretation is also part of the interaction. As we have already indicated, face-to-face discourse is a rule governed and collaborative activity, with both the speaker and the listener having to understand what the other has in mind. In this article we would like to sketch an interpretative model of human cooperative communication. We focus our attention on the cases, where the listener tries to be cooperative, interpreting the speech of his/her interlocutor in a cooperative way.

Our proposal is based on a modular view of human mentality in general, and of linguistic competence in particular. The analysis of the concept of "understanding" makes it possible to put forward some of its modules and formulate rules that can help people to better understand one another in a face-to-face discourse. These rules of understanding can be viewed as something like conventionalized wisdom or as advice to be tolerant. They can also be interpreted as communicative strategies and tactics of the listener. We refer to "An Ideal Husband" by Oscar Wilde as an empirical material.

Module 1. Knowledge of a particular language is an important component of understanding. As Wittgenstein indicates "learning a language brings about the understanding of it" (Wittgenstein, 1974: 41). This opinion underlies the following adjacency pair:

Mabel Chiltern: Aren't you coming to the music-room?

Lord Goring: Not if there is any music going on, Miss Mabel.

Mabel Chiltern: The music is in German. You would not understand it

Opinions differ when one has to answer the question what it means to apply linguistic knowledge to understanding in face-to-face discourse. In Dummet's opinion, "to understand a word is to grasp its potential contribution to the meaning of any sentence in which it may occur" (Dummet 1983: 98). Others think that "language performs its primary function not through elegance, which is for mathematicians and other poets, but through persistence" (Bremer, 1996: 18). Knowing a natural language is a necessary prerequisite for carrying out face-to-face discourse successfully for language is the most important medium of human communication. We express and exchange information, ideas, emotions, attitudes, and prejudices with the help of language. But if we really want to understand our interlocutor we should not forget that he/she might have different understanding of the words we use.

Hence, rule 1: Do not overestimate your linguistic competence. Try to be self-critical and tolerant to what may look like a linguistic aberration by your interlocutor.

Module 2. Understanding implies, among other things, constructing appropriate contexts, i.e. inferring the most plausible interpretations, induced by a systematic interaction between linguistic knowledge. We understand a person even before he/she finishes a sentence: in a dialogue understanding runs simultaneously with utterances.

The listener is actively propounding guesses rather than to force the right guess. This complicates perception of the interlocutor's speech and may cause misunderstanding. Misunderstanding can be sometimes avoided if the speaker says in the beginning what he/she wanted to say in the end. But how does the listener know it? Adequate understanding typically involves hierarchies of hypotheses about the meanings of an utterance.

However, sometimes interpreters end where others only start. What seems to be the truth to some, is but a probability for others.

Rule 2: Try to formulate the least extravagant and the most reasonable hypotheses about what you are going to hear. The less groundless expectations you generate, the better for you.

Module 3. The image and the inner world of a person you talk to is mainly formed via his/her speech. This characterizes the explanation-driven understanding as "the general process of finding the connection between events in a text" (Wilensky, 1982: 347). Very often we cannot have a whole picture of the speaker's inner world, its dynamics and laws because of unfamiliarity of the material it is built with. In such cases we try to construct "a model world" of our interlocutor using familiar to us images and perceptions, that very often leads to misunderstanding. Let's analyze such an example:

Mr. Montford: Like some supper, Mrs. Marchmont?
Mrs. Marchmont: Thank you, Mr. Montford, I never touch supper. But I will sit beside you and watch you.
Mr. Montford: I don't know that I like being watched when I am eating!
Mrs. Marchmont: Then I will watch someone else.
Mr. Montford: I don't know I should like that either.
Mrs. Marchmont: Pray, Mr. Montford, don't make these painful scenes of jealousy in public!

The problem is this: How does Mrs. Marchmont arrive at the interpretation of Mr. Marchmont's words as jealousy? A feasible solution is that she is all the time building a model world according to her own, taking her interlocutor's remarks as an expression of a deep feeling. It is because of this that in such cases there is no longer "reality" as such; reality instead is reported, mediated and constructed by the listener.

Rule 3: While listening to your interlocutor, try to create model worlds on the basis of his words instead of using your own imaginations. Otherwise, building a model world may be considered as expressing your own position or a pose. However, patience and intellectual resources of the listener are not limited. The speaker should always keep in mind what may happen when the audience gets tired of constructing model worlds following the speaker's words. Interpretation may then result in frustration, bringing about loss of sympathy with the general ideas of the speaker.

Module 4. Linguistic interpretation of the general, overall meaning of the speaker's words is carried out in two directions. *First,* the listener finds out what the speaker means literally. People never care much about language accuracy. Every now and then we have to deal with slips of tongue and unconventional usage, yet it is not difficult to understand literal meaning of the interlocutor's speech, what he/she is saying. *Secondly,* the listener has to find out the speaker's communicative intention and compute his implicatures. Speakers differ in the ways of explicating their intentions, they can either openly express them or mask them in indirect speech acts. Despite the fact, that all these intentions vary from person to person, they can be successfully recognized if we are acquainted with the speaker to some degree and can guess what he/she has in mind.

Hence rule 4: Do not spare efforts to study your interlocutor's personality, this knowledge will help you in interpreting his/her speech correctly. Those who regularly follow the speeches of popular politicians, can predict what one may say and mean and what would be utterly improbable for them to say. That is, we know in advance their repertoire and style of speech as well as the scope of possible reference. This knowledge constitutes the basis for understanding political jokes and parody, so characteristic of today's political life.

Module 5. Like our inner world, the model worlds constitute each a whole. As a rule, model worlds differ from our inner world only in the points clearly indicated in speech, when we say and hear such phrases as "I wholly disagree with you...", "No, by no means", etc. For instance:

Lady Markby: I used to wear yellow a good deal in my early days, and would do so now if Sir John was not so painfully personal in his observations, and a man on the question of dress is always ridiculous, isn't he?
Mrs. Cheveley: Oh, no! I think men are the only authorities on dress.
Mr. Markby: Really? One wouldn't say so from the sort of hats they wear, would one?

Here rule 5 should be applied: Pay special attention to those passages in your interlocutor's speech that destroy the integrity and coherence of your model of the world the speaker is trying to impart to you. Remember that inconsistency or incoherence of a model world may sometimes be a result of an inadequate perception of the logically irrefutable images that you are imparted you.

Module 6. One of the tasks of the listener is to compute relations inside the model and inner worlds. This is a matter of identifying internal links between different events in the interlocutor's message, including his/

her arguments. Ch. Fillmore notes in this connection that the language we use reflects the ways in which we "frame" or "schematize" the events described in the text. An autonomous consequence of understanding the elemental parts of the text is the experience of attempting to figure out the relevance of schematizations we have been invited to apply and then to compute the speaker's reasons for inviting us to work out schematizations of the textual world in that way (Fillmore, 1984: 137).

Attention pulsates in face-to-face discourse: what was first in focus drifts away and may come back in a different light. This pulsing reflects unconscious efforts to identify links between different fragments of the recreated picture of the world. How this happens has been thoroughly investigated by the Prague linguists, their task being to describe "typical ways in which thematic material will be grasped and, in the construction and production of a text, processed and presented" (Данеъ, 1999: 3).

This justifies **rule 6: Try to focus on the message, follow its shifting. Do not concentrate exclusively on your favourite ideas. Do not try to find your favourite idea in the speaker's message at any price, yet do not rule out the possibility of coming across it in a model world of yours.**

Module 7. To achieve understanding it is important to establish links between the model world and the listener's background and contextual knowledge. We regard a sentence as being true when our understanding of the sentence fits our understanding of the situation closely enough. For instance:

Viconte De Nanjac:　　Ah! chиre Madame, quelle surprise!
　　　　　I have not seen you since Berlin!
Mrs. Cheveley:　　　Not since Berlin, Viconte. Five years ago!

Understanding may increase our stock of knowledge. Herein lies the difference between recognition and understanding of a text. Having understood a text, we acquire new information. If the listener feels that he/she is not gaining any new information from the speaker, that might increase his knowledge, it indicates that this discourse can be evaluated as meaningless. In such cases try to identify the reasons that cause such situations: you may be tired, your opinions may wholly coincide with those of your interlocutor and therefore may be quite boring for you, you may not be interested in the subject or some other reason.

Hence rule 7: If during communication you don't get any new information and you are only engaged in recognition of what your interlocutor tells you, such communication is meaningless for you.

Conclusion: Face-to-face discourse is a rule governed collaborative activity, with both the speaker and the listener having to understand what the other has in mind. In this article we have sketched an interpretative model of human cooperative communication. We focused on the listener's cooperative activities, aimed at interpreting the interlocutor's speech, thus achieving understanding. The analysis of the concept of "understanding" made it possible to put forward some of its modules and formulate rules that can help people to better understand one another in face-to-face discourse. These rules can be interpreted as communicative strategies of the listener.

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ნინო კირვალიძე

გაგება პირისპირ დისკურსში: კიდევ ერთხელ კონვერსაციულ მაქსიმებზე

რეზიუმე

სტატიაში გაგება პირისპირ დისკურსში განიხილება ინტერსუბიექტურობის და ინტერაქციულობის ჭრილში როგორც დინამიური თანამშრომლობითი აქტივობა, ორიენტირებული ინფერენციის პროცესზე. ინფერენცია გულისხმობს მსმენელის უნარს, სწორად მოახდინოს მეტყველი სუბიექტის ინტენციის ამოცნობა. 1975 წელს გრაისმა შეიმუშავა კომუნიკაციური თანამშრომლობის პრინციპზე დაფუძნებული კონვერსაციული მაქსიმები, რომლებიც ფაქტობრივად მეტყველი სუბიექტის სტრატეგიებია გაწერილი. წინამდებარე სტატიაში კი შემოთავაზებულია ინფერენციის წესები, რომლებიც შეიძლება განხილულ იქნეს როგორც გაგებაზე ორიენტირებული მსმენელის სტრატეგიები.

Нино Кирвалидзе

Понимание в непосредственном дискурсе: ещё раз о конверсационных максимах

Р е з ю м е

В статье понимание в непосредственном дискурсе рассматривается на фоне интер-субъективности и интерактивности как динамическая кооперативная деятельностьё ориен-тированная на процесс инференции. Инференция подразумевает способность слушающего предугадать интенцию говорящего. В 1975 году П. Грайс разработал конверсационные максимы коммуникативного сотрудничестваё которые фактически представляют стратегии говорящего субъекта. В данной статье предлагаются правила инференцииё которых можно рассматривать как стратегии слушающегоё ориентированные на понимание.

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