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THE LEXICALIZATION OF LINGUISTIC ACTION

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0. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic explanation procedures are characterized by a typically expansionistic mentality. Just consider this year's BLS Call For Papers. I quote:

"This year[...] we especially encourage submissions in which arguments for a particular solution or explanation include evidence from another level of description. For example, a paper on syntax may consider semantics or pragmatics, an article on acquisition may seek explanation in terms of cognition, a typological study may look to processing factors, a phonological problem may have reference to physiological phenomena, a grammatical problem may find a solution in socio-cultural factors, etc."

It seems to me that it was hardly necessary to call for papers of this kind. The examples are representative for what is common practice in linguistics today. I dub this practice 'expansionistic' because, if we regard the scale phonology-morphology-syntax-semantics-pragmatics as a hierarchy of levels of linguistic description, we can say that whenever arguments for a particular explanation include evidence from another level of description, this 'other level of description' is invariably higher up on the scale or completely outside the scale on a higher level of generality. The view is even explicitly defended that such explanation procedures are necessary, and it is this view that dominated the semantic criticism of transformational grammar and that has caused the avalanche of pragmatic writings. In this paper I want to draw the attention to an area of research which may force us to take a few steps down in search for evidence in order to avoid circular theorizing.

1. PRAGMATICS: THE DEAD END OF LINGUISTICS ?

The area I am talking about is pragmatics, which has blessed and complicated linguistics by bringing in social structures, cultural patterns, cognitive notions (especially in the current gestaltist trend), psychology in general and, occasionally, even parapsycho-

logy. But pragmatics is not only the universal benefactor which offers linguists a way out whenever they get stuck. There are also purely pragmatic notions which, themselves, require clarification and explanation. The most central one is the concept *linguistic action*.

The main problem of pragmatics seems to be that, by definition, it is the all-encompassing highest level of the hierarchical structure of linguistics. And since linguists, due to the common explanation procedure sketched in the introduction, have never learnt to go back to a lower hierarchical level to gain insight in their object of investigation, the notion of linguistic action has been exclusively subjected to a theoretical, speculative approach.

I call an approach theoretical when it is based on a preconceived framework of abstract and general concepts. To clarify this with respect to pragmatics, a few illustrations are needed.

Take, for instance, attempts at classifying speech acts. In addition to Searle's five-fold division into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations (see Searle 1976), there are not only those linguists and philosophers who propose slight modifications of this classification, but also some who maintain, quite seriously, that the number of separate classes is more like five or six hundred, while others contend that there are exactly three basic speech act types from which all the others can be derived. Thus, pragmatics has its splitters and its lumpers. The attitude of the splitters is based on some postulated principles of scientific taxonomies such as absolute discreteness; the lumpers are mainly trying to assign a basic function to a couple of grammatical forms. Both splitting and lumping can be theoretically justified. This is not a problem in itself, but it becomes one as soon as we realize that as many classifications can be proposed as there are theoretical points of view. For, what can we learn from such an uncontrollable growth of theories and speculations? The source of the evil is the largely theoretical approach to which the notion of linguistic action has been subjected.

There are many more pragmatic questions to which, for the same reason, only contradictory and mostly unilluminating answers are to be found in the linguistic literature. Some examples: Is there such a thing as illocutionary force, as opposed to meaning? How essential are perlocutionary effects to the description of speech acts? Are explicit performatives direct or indirect speech acts?

All this does not mean that the theoretical approach has not produced anything worthwhile. It has; see, e.g. Habermas (1979). But theorizing becomes too easily circular. And if there is no way of breaking out of the circle -- which there isn't if the only possible direction of explanation is upwards -- then we must conclude that pragmatics is the dead end of linguistics, in which

case the avalanche of pragmatic writings can only be expected -- in keeping with common avalanche practice -- to cover up what it is falling on top of, viz. what is interesting in language as a form of social behavior.

2. AN EXPLANATORY WAY BACK: LINGUISTIC ACTION VERBIALS

Dead-end streets are only dangerous when they are, at the same time, one-way streets. Fortunately, for linguistics there seems to be an explanatory way back. I am not proposing anything remotely similar to what the paleoanthropologist Basil Cooke did, when he spent almost a decade studying the pedigrees of fossilized pigs in order to learn about humanity's family tree. So, what do I mean?

Social action is by definition 'meaningful' in the sense that the participants associate it with a frame of concepts. An understanding of this conceptual framework is of vital importance for our insight into the action itself. Similarly, before we can generalize about universals of linguistic action, we should investigate how speakers of different languages in different cultures conceptualize it. Thus, a *conceptual approach* to supplement the predominantly theoretical approach is necessary.

But conceptualizations cannot be studied directly. We can, however, make the approach *empirical-conceptual* by taking an indirect route, e.g. via the comparative study of *linguistic action verbials* (i.e. verbs and verb-like expressions used to describe linguistic action) in different languages, on the assumption that words somehow reflect conceptualization habits. Such an empirical-conceptual, *lexical approach* to linguistic action would be an example of reversing the direction of explanation in linguistics: results of lexical-semantic investigations would function as evidence for or against statements about a pragmatic notion.

I would like to dwell much longer on the justification of the approach (see the first chapter of Verschueren 1979) and the lexical-semantic principles involved (see the second chapter of Verschueren 1979), but limitations of time oblige me to stick to the cursory presentation of some preliminary types of results and of perspectives for further research.

3. PRELIMINARY TYPES OF RESULTS

3.0 The major result of lexical research in the domain of linguistic action so far is the gratifying conclusion that it was not a complete illusion to believe that a one-sided theoretical approach involved the dangers of inventing distinctions which are not really there (see 3.1), of neglecting aspects of linguistic behavior which *are* there, and very prominently so (see 3.2), and of proposing theoretical constructs which may or may not reflect

reality, but usually not in the symmetrical fashion proposed (see 3.3). Moreover, it has become clear that linguistic action verbials reflect cultural attitudes (see 3.4) and are linked with matters of cognitive salience (see 3.5).

3.1 First, on the most trivial level, it follows from lexical research that the categories of speech acts which are usually distinguished are not reflected as conceptually distinct in the lexicalization of linguistic action in natural languages. The absence of diffuseness would not even be defended by the most ardent of theorists, but the extent to which non-diffuseness is absent, only becomes clear when having a close look at sets of lexical items.

More interestingly, lexical research can offer evidence showing defects in common definitions of classes while at the same time suggesting improved versions. Consider, for example, the class of expressives the point of which is, according to Searle's definition, that a certain psychological state is expressed (which must be different from the belief expressed in representatives, the wish expressed in directives and the intention expressed in commissives). But the expression of a psychological state, in itself, does not set expressives apart from other types of speech acts. Compare:

- (1) I am sorry that you could not come over for a visit
- (2) I am sorry for having been so rude to you
- (3) I am sorry that your father died

Also compare the way in which these acts can be described:

- (1') S said/stated/claimed that he was sorry that ...
- (2') S apologized for having been rude
- (3') S commiserated/condoled H's father's death

Though all three are expressions of regret, act (1) is normally described as a representative (there isn't even any way in English to describe (1) *as an expression of emotion* except with "S expressed his regret that ...") whereas for (2) and (3) we have explicitly expressive descriptive verbs available. Studying the lexicalization vs. non-lexicalization pattern of these and many other examples has led us to the hypothesis that what sets the traditional class of expressives apart from other speech acts is the extent to which the emotion or attitude expressed is relevant to the hearer.

3.2 Second, linguistic action verbials draw our attention to aspects of verbal behavior which are usually neglected or even completely ignored in the linguistic and philosophical literature. The most striking example is probably the area of linguistic

silence, the absence of speech. Natural language lexicalizations transform this seemingly marginal aspect of linguistic behavior into an essential one. There are hundreds of words and expressions to describe being silent. Silence is not just the absence of sounds. It is gradable and characterized by a certain intensity. Compare TO BE SILENT with TO BE SILENT AS THE GRAVE, or TO BE MUM AS AN OYSTER, NOT BREATHE A WORD, or TO FORSWEAR SPEAKING. Silence can have a propositional content so-to-speak: one can BE SILENT ABOUT STH., KEEP STH. SECRET, KEEP STH. IN PETTO, SMOTHER STH. Linguistic silence occurs in a certain context: one can FALL SILENT or KNOCK IT OFF, or one can simply NOT GET A WORD IN EDGWAYS. Silence has its causes and its motives, and it can be TOMBLIKE, SOLEMN or even PREGNANT. It is, therefore, high time to study it more seriously than has been done so far (as in the few ethnomethodological studies of pauses in conversation).

3.3 Third, lexicalization patterns can show theoretical constructs concerning aspects of linguistic behavior to be wrong or misleading. For instance, in the area of deviations from the truth, there are not just simple acts of lying, but also deviations along a quantity scale of truth (with at one end TO EXAGGERATE and at the other TO UNDERSTATE) and a quality scale of truth (with at one end TO SLANDER and at the other TO WHITEWASH). Theoretically, these four poles should be of equal importance. However, in the lexicalization of linguistic behavior, the understatement-pole is underrepresented in comparison with the others; in fact, in some languages such as Dutch, there is even a clear gap (which can only be filled with a pun on OVERDRIJVEN, the equivalent of TO EXAGGERATE, viz. the non-existent word 'ONDERDRIJVEN'). This asymmetry in what looks like a symmetrical structure requires further investigation.

A second example is taken from the area of the directives. Often it is claimed that WARNING is negative ADVISING. Upon closer examination, however, this symmetrical relationship on the directionality scale of directives (with at one end attempts to direct someone towards doing something, and at the other attempts to make the hearer not do something), distorts reality. A first surprising fact about this scale is that the two extremes are not occupied by TO ORDER and TO PROHIBIT. These two are not exclusively positive and exclusively negative, respectively, because it is possible to order someone not to do something and to prohibit someone not to do something (which is equivalent to obliging him or her to do something). An exclusively positive directive would be TO INVITE (in its original sense of asking someone to come over to your house) and related acts; an exclusively negative one is TO VETO. TO ORDER and TO PROHIBIT are slightly closer to the center of the scale and could be called intrinsically positive and negative, respectively: TO ORDER is intrinsically positive

because it is positive if combined with a positive propositional content and negative if combined with a negative propositional content; TO PROHIBIT is intrinsically negative because it is negative when combined with a positive propositional content and positive when combined with a negative propositional content. To come back to the acts of WARNING and ADVISING, whereas TO ADVISE describes an intrinsically positive directive (in the same sense as TO ORDER does), TO WARN is not in the same sense an intrinsically negative directive; the negativity of WARNING is not as strong as that of PROHIBITING though it would probably be true to say that TO WARN may be more frequently used to describe negative directive acts than to describe positive directive acts. Thus, TO WARN is not just the negative counterpart of TO ADVISE; it has to be placed considerable further towards the center of the scale.

3.4 That linguistic action verbials reflect cultural attitudes is hardly surprising. One illustration should be sufficient. Consider the following verbials: TO ASPERSE, TO BACKBITE, TO BAD-MOUTH, TO BESMEAR, TO BSMIRCH, TO BLACKEN, TO CALUMNIATE, TO CAST A SLUR ON, TO CAST ASPERSIONS ON, TO DEFAME, TO DEFILE, TO DENIGRATE, TO DISPARAGE, TO DRAG THROUGH THE MUD, TO GIVE A BAD NAME, TO LIBEL, TO MALIGN, TO RUN DOWN, TO SLUR, TO SMIRCH, TO SPEAK ILL OF, TO SPEAK SLIGHTINGLY OF, TO SULLY, TO TARNISH, TO TRADUCE, TO VILIFY. All of these are associated, in varying degrees, with untruthfulness. In fact, apart from TO CRITICIZE and a few others, I cannot think of any linguistic action verbials which contain 'to say something bad or unfavorable about someone or something' as part of their meaning, and which are not, in all or most of their uses, associated with untruthfulness. This is in sharp contrast with the large set of verbials meaning 'to say something good or favorable about someone or something' without being associated with a lack of truthfulness (such as TO PRAISE, TO LAUD, TO GLORIFY, etc.). Thus the lexicon reflects a usually unconscious value judgment which is entirely in keeping with Freud's observation that "society makes what is disagreeable into what is untrue".

3.5 There is also a clear link between the cognitive salience of certain forms of language behavior and the way in which they are lexicalized (or not lexicalized). For instance, every language contains a large number of routine expressions. For some of those, we have descriptive linguistic action verbials at our disposal, such as TO APOLOGIZE, TO COMMISERATE, TO CONGRATULATE, TO GREET, TO THANK, etc. But for others, English does not offer words to describe them. Just think of expressions such as "Never mind" (in response to an apology) or "You're welcome" (in response to an act of thanking). Such forgotten routines are consistently less

important in the lexicalization of linguistic action; an expression such as "You're welcome", for instance, does not play a separate role: it is part of the thanking ritual as a whole. Thus, the lexicon does not even make forgetting into a totally whimsical activity.

4. PERSPECTIVES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

These types of preliminary results are based on comparative investigations of a few sample areas of linguistic action (see Verschueren 1979 and 1981a). Since every language contains thousands of linguistic action verbials, picking out such sample areas was one way of coping with a nearly impossible task. The alternative, and the logically next step, is to restrict our topic of investigation to a single level of the hierarchical structure which also characterizes the linguistic action part of the lexicon, viz. the level of what could be called *basic linguistic action verbs* (a notion for which a tentative definition is offered in Verschueren 1981b). Such a restriction would make a very extensive investigation in two stages possible:

I. A comparative investigation of the *sets of basic linguistic action verbs* available in a large number of languages, from which, hopefully, 'synchronic implicational universals' can be deduced with respect to the development of the lexicalization of linguistic action (similar to those found for color terms in Berlin & Kay 1969, and for plant and animal terms in Brown 1977 and 1979).

II. A detailed comparison of the *semantic dimensions* needed for the description of the basic linguistic action verbs in a small number of languages (preferably representatives of the different stages of development which may have been discovered as synchronic implicational universals), from which *universal principles of the lexicalization of linguistic action* might be deduced.

Such an investigation would considerably deepen our insight into the nature of linguistic action itself, e.g. by settling some issues which have been raised in recent theorizing about 'basic speech act types'. Moreover, the results could later be employed as a universal starting-point for further detailed examinations of individual languages (with respect to their linguistic action verbials in general) and for small-scale comparisons. All these investigations, taken together, could be regarded as a possible empirical basis for discussing universals of linguistic action.

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