THE FORCE OF LANGUAGE AND ITS TEMPORAL UNFOLDING

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1. CONTEXT AS KNOWLEDGE

Pragmatics as an interdisciplinary field has expanded the concept of language as an object of inquiry to include the use of language by its speakers. This interest among pragmarians originated from two sets of observations: (1) some linguistic expressions cannot be understood without reference to the context of their use (e.g. personal pronouns and other deictic elements of linguistic systems) and (2) utterances not only describe the world or, rather, the experience of it, but also act upon the world, affecting our experience and the experience of others. From its inception, then, pragmatics has been two-faceted. It encouraged an expansion of the notion of language both as a code and as action. In terms of language as a code, pragmarians focused on the grammaticalization of contextual variants such as the social status of the speaker and hearer or their social relations. In terms of language as action, the focus has been on the conditions that allow for a given utterance to have certain conventional effects.

In both cases, researchers saw pragmatics as an alternative both to the logicians’ view of meaning as a propositional calculus and to Chomsky’s favoring of linguistic competence over linguistic performance. The new focus of interest for pragmatics was not just on “language” but “language in context.” At first, this meant that researchers wrestled with one main question: How does the context shape the ways in which language is used? The range of factors or dimensions deemed relevant for identifying the impact of context on language was quite vast and included the age, sex, and social class of speakers or hearers, the style of speaking, the events or activities in which language was being used, the institutional roles of participants in the interaction,
and the organization (or flow) of information in the prior discourse. Soon, however, researchers also realized that the relationship between language and context was bidirectional. Language shapes context just as much context shapes language (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992). For example, the choice of a particular linguistic expression (e.g. *tu* vs. *vous* in French) not only presupposes certain aspects of context, it also establishes them as part of the context that is being currently constructed. A request (e.g. *can I borrow your car?*) sets up a context in which the response that follows is likely to be interpreted as either an agreement or a rejection.

Despite this insight, however, most students of pragmatics have continued to treat context as knowledge and have thus failed to properly address one major question: How is knowledge transformed into action? In other words, we still do not have a clear understanding of how words actually move people to act in certain ways as opposed to others. More generally, it has been difficult for pragmaticians to bridge the gap between the notions of language as code and language as action. In what follows, I will suggest that this is partly due to the tendency to think in terms of strategic interaction (e.g. in discussing politeness) and the inability to fully appreciate the ethical implications of temporality in human interaction. Before getting to this issue, however, we need to reconsider the notion of the “force” of language.

2. **FORCE OF LANGUAGE**

The idea that language has some kind of power and plays a major role in the constitution of the social world in which speakers find themselves is by no means new, as demonstrated by the treatises of public oratory written by ancient Greek and Roman authors (e.g. Barthes, 1970; Pernot, 2000) and by the vast literature on linguistic relativity (Whorf, 1956; Hill and Mannheim, 1992; Lucy, 1992; Duranti, 1999). But the idea that the concept of meaning could also be understood as a force is more recent. It is found in the writings of two important thinkers of the twentieth century: the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the philosopher J.L. Austin.

Malinowski uses the term “force” in his examination of the power that magical formulas seemed to have for the Trobrianders (Malinowski, 1935, Vol. 2, p. 9). In his analysis, “... language is a cultural force in its own right. It enters into manual and bodily activities and plays a significant part in them, a part *sui generis* which cannot be replaced, even as it does not replace anything else” (Malinowski, 1935, Vol. 2, p. 21). This perspective suggests that the force of language is crucial for the constitution of particular social activities and at the same time cannot be understood outside of those activities.

Austin’s concept of “force” is found in his posthumous *How to Do Things with Words* and was meant to capture the ways in which a given utterance should be “taken,” that is, in terms of its *effects* on language users and the context of their interactions. Austin’s introduction of the concept