

Conceptualizing ‘interaction’ in interpersonal pragmatics: Implications for understanding and research

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Abstract

Studying interaction between persons is central in the emerging sub-discipline of interpersonal pragmatics. Following Krippendorff (1970), the particular metaphor, model, or theory one employs in conceptualizing interaction both affords and constrains not only one's theorizing, but also one's research on language use between persons. This paper examines metaphors and models commonly employed in studying interaction, arguing that their entailments are deeply consequential in framing one's understanding, as well as one's choices in observing, generating and analyzing data, and interpreting the results of research. These issues are exemplified in examining the implications of conceptualizing interaction in terms of the common encoding/decoding model of language use, versus in terms of an interactional achievement model of human communication.

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1. Introduction

“Pragmatics” is generally understood as the study of language use. If “interpersonal” is understood to index what is “inter-” or “between” persons, then “interpersonal pragmatics” indexes the study of language use between persons. Language is used between persons in many different fora, ranging from mass-mediated communication, through public speaking and small group interaction, to one-on-one, face-to-face interaction, although the mass-mediated and public speaking end of the scale is not usually regarded as “interpersonal.” Locher and Graham (2010:2) equate “interpersonal” with “relational,” so that interpersonal pragmatics is the study of language use in relational contexts, the implicit focus being the small group and one-on-one end of the scale. That implicit focus is consistent with a long tradition in the discipline of Communication in North America that defines “interpersonal communication” in terms of the micro-social, with Stewart et al. (2005:60–61), for example, arguing that at least two persons must be involved, and perhaps more so long as it remains possible for the parties to treat one another as unique individuals.

If one takes interpersonal pragmatics to be the study of language use in relational, or more generally in micro-social contexts, then central to theory and research in this emerging sub-discipline is a focus on language as used in *interaction* between the persons involved, the prototype for such interaction being one-on-one, embodied linguistic interaction. This paper problematizes what is too often left implicit in research in pragmatics: how one conceptualizes interaction is consequential for how one understands and conducts research on the phenomena of language use. Those implications are perhaps most apparent in studying interpersonal pragmatics. This paper takes as a starting point the observation that

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scholars can be seen to employ a variety of metaphors, models, and theories regarding the nature of human interaction. I examine some of these, and argue that the entailments of such conceptualizations are, in ways that have often not been recognized, consequential both for understanding and for research in interpersonal pragmatics.

Let me clarify three assumptions. First, the appearance of the term “pragmatics” is frequently taken to index the use of linguistic forms, and much of what follows will be couched in those terms. But among others, Bavelas and Chovil (2000) argue that visible human conduct is integral with the use of linguistic forms. There is only one system of embodied communicative behavior, not a system of visible conduct distinct from a system of linguistic behavior. The arguments for this position are compelling, but beyond the scope of this discussion. I believe the arguments developed herein are consistent with assuming that conduct and talk form a single, integral system. Second, following Schiffrin (1987) and Levinson (1983:364), I assume that research in language pragmatics in general, and in interpersonal pragmatics in particular, is to be empirically grounded. That is, researchers must ground their interpretations in publicly available observations of the phenomena under study, rather than in philosophical rationalization or in introspection. Ruling out rationalization and introspection neither confines research approaches to those that make objectivist or positivist epistemological assumptions, nor rules out human science research based in constructionist or interpretivist epistemologies (cf. Crotty, 1998). Third, the term “interaction” is understood and employed here interchangeably with the term “communication,” both terms indexing talk and the integral non-language conduct of co-present human beings. As in Krippendorff (2009:217–219) and Schegloff (1996:54), such talk/conduct in interaction is assumed to be “the fundamental or primordial scene of social life,” with other forms of interaction between persons such as telephonic or computer-mediated communication involving modifications of this prototypical interactional environment (cf. Heritage, 1995:108–109).

2. Conceptualizations as affording and constraining understanding

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that one indispensable feature of all human interaction is the use of metaphors, and that all such metaphors entail certain ways of conceptualizing the phenomena they are employed to help understand. Krippendorff (2009:Chap. 3) draws directly on Lakoff and Johnson in discussing six metaphors of communication. Each of these metaphors is employed in everyday talk, and “[e]ach entails its own logic for human interaction and the use of each creates its own social reality” (Krippendorff, 2009:48). Most importantly, “metaphors have *entailments* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) for the target domain they thereby organize far beyond any initial structural similarity” (here and below the emphasis is Krippendorff’s). Space allows only a brief summary of the six metaphors and of their key entailments or conceptual commitments with regard to studying interaction.

The container metaphor. Krippendorff (2009) points to the pervasiveness in everyday talk of the understanding that communication is a process of “sending message *contents* from one place to another,” what are called the “signals” or “vehicles” serving “as *containers* for ideas, meanings, information or things *that are preserved* during their communication from an origin to a destination” (2009:51). Using the container metaphor entails equating communication with “sharing” because the content conveyed is always preserved in the containers that carry it, hence “*exposure* to the same *content* causes *common* knowledge, *same* views, or *thinking alike*” (2009:52).

The hydraulic metaphor. In place of the container metaphor’s discrete entities carried by vehicles, the hydraulic metaphor envisions ideas, meanings, or information as substances that are preserved as they flow through conduits or channels (Krippendorff, 2009:54–56). While there may be filters or barriers to these flows, as well as floods or overloads, using this metaphor also entails that communication will engender sharing, given that the flowing substances are preserved as they move.

The control metaphor. This metaphor frames communication as a causal phenomenon, i.e., as a means or instrument for attaining particular objectives. Conceived of as such, communication is a process subject to rational analysis and decision making in pursuit of those objectives. Krippendorff (2009:57) argues that the metaphor entails distinguishing between “knowledgeable agents” with specific goals or intentions, and audience members who are largely “passive recipients.” Another key entailment is that “communication becomes limited to *successful communication*” in that the agent’s goals or intentions become the standard for evaluating the recipient’s understanding or behavior, deviations from the speaker’s intended effect on the recipient therefore equating with some degree of misunderstanding, miscommunication, or *failure of communication*.

The transmission metaphor. Krippendorff (2009:58) argues that “By not rendering meanings as residing in what is *transmitted*, the transmission metaphor radically departs from the container and hydraulic metaphors,” what is transmitted according to this metaphor being no more than the coded signal. The signal is produced by a sender who employs a pre-established code to translate the message into a transmittable signal, with the expectation that the receiver of the signal will employ the same code to reverse the translation and recover the message.

The war metaphor. This metaphor derives directly from Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who frame it in terms of opponents engaged in winning and losing arguments, and planning and using strategies to attack and defend positions.

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