Of babies and bath water: Is there any place for Austin and Grice in interpersonal pragmatics?

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Abstract

This paper discusses a particular strand of interpersonal pragmatics that may be known as 'discursive' pragmatics and attempts to delineate what is entailed in such an approach. Some scholars may characterise it as placing emphasis on participant evaluations, others may foreground the analysis of contextualised and sequential texts, while still others consider it to include both of these. In general, though, discursive pragmatics often seems to involve a reaction to, and a contrast with, so-called Gricean intention-based approaches. In this paper I argue that, far from discarding the insights of Grice, Austin and others, a discursive approach to interpersonal pragmatics should embrace those aspects of non-discursive pragmatics that provide us with a 'tool-kit' and a vocabulary for examining talk-in-interaction. At the same time, I will argue that the shortcomings of the speaker-based, intention-focused pragmatics can be compensated for, not by privileging hearer evaluations of meaning, but by taking an ethnographic and, to some extent, ethnomethodological approach to the analysis of naturally-occurring discourse data. By providing a critique of Locher and Watts' (2005) paradigmatic example of a discursive approach to politeness and then a sample analysis of interactional data, I demonstrate how a combination of insights from Gricean pragmatics and from ethnomethodology allows the analyst to comment on the construction and negotiation of meaning in discourse, without having recourse to notions of either intention or evaluation.

1. Introduction

The aim of this special issue is to make a contribution towards defining, theorising, and perhaps delimiting, an area of pragmatics that may be characterised as 'interpersonal'. Clearly, an interpersonal dimension must take account of dynamic linguistic interaction between individuals and so will have considerable overlap with the discursive turn in politeness theory and in pragmatics generally (Haugh, 2007). When there is a paradigm shift, such as this, in a research area, the old or 'traditional' ideas are sometimes all too easily discarded in favour of innovative approaches. Furthermore, as Leech (2007) points out, the new approach may be partially based on reviews or mis-readings of the original work. This move towards a discursive approach seems to have gained momentum largely as a reaction to Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) treatment of linguistic politeness, much of which is entrenched in Gricean and Austinian pragmatics. Critics of Brown and Levinson (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Mills, 2003) have shown that this traditional approach to language in use (also characterised by Leech, 1983 and Levinson, 1983) has a number of weaknesses, largely arising out of a tendency to focus on speaker intention, on decontextualised utterances, and on over-ambitious claims for universal principles (Leech, 2007). The answer to these criticisms is generally thought to lie with a post-modern orientation to the analysis of stretches of naturally-occurring interpersonal interaction. However, it remains unclear what exactly is entailed

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in such an approach. For some theorists it may simply be the use of interactional data, whereas for others it necessarily involves evaluations of norm-oriented behaviour (Locher, 2006). Still others assume that the discourse itself has a crucial role to play in the construction of meaning (for example, Kasper, 2006; Arundale, 1999, 2006, 2010). It is this so-called 'discursive' strand of interpersonal pragmatics that I will be discussing in this paper.

I want to argue, then, that discursive pragmatics should not be regarded as the antidote to traditional, intention-based pragmatics, but rather that it should be regarded as a development of traditional pragmatics, which keeps the fundamental insights of Austin and Grice but improves on their approach by applying it to interactional discourse. Furthermore, following Haugh (2007) I shall argue that a discursive approach does not necessarily answer the criticisms levelled at traditional pragmatics unless it incorporates the sociological and ethnographic perspectives that underpin the work of Goffman ([1983] 1997) and Gumperz (1982) as well as, more recently, Arundale's (1999, 2010) 'Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication' that makes the case for a relational and interactional model of face and meaning-making. I shall argue that, in fact, rather than being the antithesis of post-modern thinking, Austin and Grice made many essential observations about language in use which still usefully, and crucially, apply to an interpersonal discursive approach to pragmatics. I will do this first by outlining how we can separate out those areas of intention-based pragmatics that should be discarded in favour of an interpersonal approach, whilst also demonstrating which insights should be retained. In other words, this is an attempt to establish which principles and assumptions of traditional pragmatics should be dispensed with (to be thrown out with the bath water, so to speak) and those that should be incorporated into an interpersonal discursive approach (the all-important 'baby').

Using already published examples of interpersonal interaction from Locher and Watts (2005), in which the analysis might be considered a prime example of the post-modern discursive politeness perspective, I will discuss the limitations of such an approach and then illustrate how traditional pragmatics can compensate for some of the pitfalls of a post-modernist analysis as long as it is combined with a sequential analysis of the construction and negotiation of meaning as a social achievement (Arundale, 2006). After re-working the Locher and Watts (2005) analysis, I will also refer to analyses of my own data, which similarly exemplify a sociological/interactional (Grainger, 2011a) approach to interpersonal discourse.

2. Defining a discursive approach to interpersonal pragmatics

Many commentators link discourse analysis with post-modernism (Haugh, 2007; Mills, 2011) and it is easy to get the impression that a discursive approach necessarily involves post-modern principles. Indeed the terms are often used alongside one another, and sometimes interchangeably (Kadar, 2011). However, if taken literally, a discursive approach to the analysis of language could simply be one that examines 'discourse' rather than sentences. In the first chapter of a volume of essays dedicated to ''Discursive approaches to politeness'' Mills states that ''theorists are no longer content to analyse politeness and impoliteness as if they were realised through the use of isolated phrases and sentences.''(Mills, 2011:26). This summarises what I would regard as the essential difference between discursive approaches and traditional approaches. That is to say, discursive politeness and discursive pragmatics study sequences of naturally-occurring connected talk and text. Beyond this essentially methodological characteristic, I would argue it is difficult to generalise as to what constitutes a discursive approach.

One of the problems is, of course, that there are several conceptions of what discourse itself is. According to Schiffrin (1994) and Schiffrin et al. (2003), they all fall into one of three categories: ''(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes nonlinguistic and nonspecific instances of language'' (2003:1). The first of these is linguistically-oriented and treats discourse merely as a structure that is above the level of the sentence (Stubbs, 1983:1, Van Dijk, 1985). In this case, then, it is not necessarily also *interpersonal*. The second refers to the more functionalist approach taken within pragmatics, sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication. Brown and Yule (1983:x) also identify these two definitions of discourse in suggesting that ''discourse analysis on the one hand includes the study of linguistic forms and the regularities of their distribution and, on the other hand, involves a consideration of the general principles of interpretation by which people normally make sense of what they hear and read''. Fasold (1990:65), on the other hand, defines discourse analysis as simply ''the study of any aspect of language in use''. This functionalist approach, then, has a much more interpersonal interpretation and treats discourse as a part of human communication, with all the social and cultural influences that that entails.

However, a third conception of discourse can be allied to Foucault's idea of a ''system of regulated practices'' (1972:80). Thus, discourse for Foucault and for critical discourse analysts such as Fairclough (1995) and Wodak (1996) is the entire socio-cultural context; discourse is ''social practice'' (Fairclough, 1992:28). In this conception, discourse is not restricted to interpersonal interaction, although it includes it. According to Mills (2011) the main interest for Foucauldian scholars is ''the role of discourse in constituting reality and social norms.'' (Mills, 2011:27). In this approach, ''the term 'discourses' not only becomes a count noun, but further refers to a broad conglomeration of linguistic and nonlinguistic social practices and ideological assumptions that together construct power or racism'' (Schiffrin et al., 2003:1). This differs