PRAGMATICS AND IDENTITY

Jacob L. Mey

Resumo

A pragmática pode ser considerada como o *locus* de integração de vários domínios do comportamento humano. Como "teoria geral dos sistemas comunicativos" (Caffi, 2001), a pragmática constitui a convergência de atos realizados em relação à sociedade a que pertence. No entanto, neste trabalho pretende-se debater um conceito duplo (e dialético) de identidade: de um lado, o agente autônomo (o/a falante/ouvinte de Saussure); do outro lado, o sujeito societário.

Palavras-chave: Pragmática, identidade, sociedade.

1. IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOR

According to Caffi (2000), pragmatics gathers the different forms of human behavior into a "general theory of communicative systems".[1]

That is, the various domains in which humans behave socially in communication: linguistic, sociological, psychological, institutional, conversational, and so on, can be gathered to one common denominator: the creation of a *user identity*.

The person acting socially exercises these 'acts of identity' mainly through the use of language. The pragmatics of language use thus has a special, 'identifying' component: the user constitutes him/herself as a language user in a particular societal context. This constitution depends not only on the free choices of the individual as placing him/herself in the

_____

[1]"La pragmatica offre lo spazio teorico entro il quale integrare dimensioni linguistiche, sociologiche, psichologiche. L'idea di pragmatica che meglio si adatta a questa integrazione — in larga misura ancora da attuare — è quella di una teoria generale del sistema comunicativo nel cui àmbito diverse dimensioni convergono e interagiscono. Il miglior punto d'osservazione per cogliere questa convergenza è dato dalle scelte stilistiche del parlante in un contexto attualizzato, scelte dalle quali è possibile inferire ateggiamenti e investimenti emotivi." (Caffi, 2001: Abstr.)

context of a particular community, but also, and mainly, on the way the community defines the access to its privileges and rights. The constraints imposed by the society are, again, often expressed in the way the community organizes and controls the use of language.

The next section will go into some detail as to this relationship between the individual's identity and his or her social use of the communicative systems

2. IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

The case of emerging and oppressed languages and dialects furnishes a good example of this convergence of behaviors into a common identity. Many researchers have remarked on the need among emerging nations to create a tangible symbolic identity by establishing some form of consensus about language use, and deciding on questions such as: What is correct language, which dialect should be taken into consideration when creating a standard, what kind of orthography should be created following which principles of orthography (phonemic or letter-based) and so on. Hellinger remarks, speaking of emergent creoles,

> A genuinely creole orthography will strengthen the structural and psychological identity of the creole; ... it will provide a source for higher prestige and may therefore facilitate native speakers' *identification* with the creole language and culture (Hellinger, 1986: 67, quoted Sebba, 1996: 88; my emphasis).

In this quote, a direct connection is suggested between the identity of the speaker and the existence of a standardized, universally accepted form of the language. This standard is the *written* one, and in its absence not only the *spoken* language itself will be endangered, but the entire language community may suffer an 'identity crisis'.

The creation and maintenance of one's language can be said to be an 'act of identity', in Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1984) words. The

identity that we act out is always a societally-determined one, and therefore we cannot unilaterally 'fix' our own identity or choose our own variety of speech or writing; the story of G. B. Shaw, who concocted his own spelling, and single-handedly (and unsuccessfully, as we know) tried to reform the English orthographic system is a clear example.

2.1. SPEAKER IDENTITY

The identity created in and by the language is matched by the identity created in the persons speaking. The cultural effect of a new orthography can be revolutionary, and the writing systems that are thus introduced are far from neutral, from the point of view of ideology and identity.

When the language reformer Ivar Aasen created the standard for the Norwegian language (which later came to be called, with somewhat of an oxymoron, 'New Norwegian', even though it was based on the older, dialectal forms still spoken in the rural parts of the country), his intention was to create a linguistic and cultural identity for those segments of the Norwegian population that had been left out of the basically urban-centered culture of the educated. But even so, he still had to battle against the diverging tendencies that wished to keep as many 'alternative forms' (*sideformer*) alive as possible, the latter being considered of 'indexical' value to the smaller and more refractive identities among the rural population.

These early efforts at establishing orthographies for as yet non-written idioms tried to capture the sounds of the language or dialects exactly as they were pronounced. To this end, various phonetic transcriptions were devised, some of them of great complexity (as an example, consider the Dania system for Danish, or the system developed by the Finno-Ugric Dialect Society, in which every letter has at least two, sometimes three or four qualifying diacritics).

One could say that these systems try to capture the *speaker* and his or her *identity* as established by the production and reproduction of the sounds of a language. This (re)production should be identical to, and identify the speaker with, that of the other speaking individuals.

2.2. TEXTUAL IDENTITY

More recent tendencies in orthographic reforms and new orthographic systems have originated in the modern linguistic notion of the *phoneme*. The phoneme is a strictly relative, distinctive unit; it often directly disregards the phonetic realities of the language, especially in cases where possible differences in pronunciation are deemed not to make any difference in the meaning of the words. The result is that even native speakers sometimes are in doubt as to how to understand this 'scientific' orthography; as a means of acquiring mastery of the spoken word in foreign languages, such an orthography is not much help.

In addition, subtle morphemic and morphonological distincions may be lost in the scientific transcription. A good example is found in the new (1967) (West) Greenlandic orthography, which is based on a more or less strictly applied phonemic principle: one, and only one, letter for each distinctive sound—with the result that a number of vocalic syllables that originally were distinguishable in writing, now are conflated morphologically. The spellings that reflected an earlier stage, in which morphological differences were marked phonetically, were abandoned, since they did not reflect (more precisely, *no longer* reflected) a difference in pronunciation. It should be added that the spelling reformers did not dare go all the way: today, there still are in Greenlandic five traditional vowel *letters* (i, a, u, e, o), against only three vowel *phonemes* (i, a, u); the positional variants [e] and [o] of the phonemes /i/ and /u/ are phonetically so different from their phonemic representation that a difference in writing was tolerated.

3. IDENTITY AND SELF-CONSTITUTION

When one asks for the reasons behind this need to establish the identity of the speaker as realized in a textual identity, it is interesting to follow the reflections offered by Mendes Barros (1996) in an article, in which she discusses the impact of the linguistic missionary work (mainly undertaken by the Summer Institute of Linguistics) on the alphabetization of unwritten languages. She points out that the Protestant

view of the Word of God as eternal, immovable, and identical demands the greatest possible uniformity and identity in translating and transcribing the Biblical text. Local varieties of pronunciation should not be reflected in the sacred wording; a uniformed, phonemic spelling represents a

> ... 'tipo lingüístico', definido pelas características da repetição idêntica, sem variação semântica ou marcas particulares. Essa qualidade ... terá importância na constituição de uma literalidade cristã. Dicionários, gramáticas, glossários, cartilhas, e, finalmente, a Bíblia nas línguas indígenas são obras que institucionalizam, pela escrita, sinonímias [*identidades*] para o discurso cristão ... (Mendes Barros, 1996: 40; my addition)

In this view, the speaking identity, the Self, is constituted in relation to a superordinate, Divine identity, an authority who imposes a universal identity on the language user, as 'child of God', as one of the 'faithful', as a 'member of the Church', and so on. In the secular sphere, the identity of the speaker is established as being a member of a uniform, modern society, where individual differences in speech function as reminders of times when people lived in isolated, backward settlements and did not have any way to establish contacts with other people on a universal level of communication, as it is the case in a modern society.

But this extended contact has its price. Whereas the 'primitive' society could provide an identity to its members, while letting them keep their individual characteristics (as expressed in the use of first names or nicknames), with the advent of enlightenment everybody became a 'citizen': even the unfortunate King of France was addressed, in the context of his court process, as 'Le Citoyen Capet'. Personal *identity* is lost to a generalized *ideality*.

The written expression of this new 'common' identity was the uniformed orthography. Whereas earlier, poets and common people (if they were able to write at all) enjoyed great liberties in the way they spelled their language, from the late 18th century on, a new focus came to be placed on the art of 'writing correctly', called '*orthographia*', with a Greek term that probably would not have made sense to the Greeks themselves.

The identity that this new art reflected was not only that of the user as a person that was able to assume his or her duties in the civilized society of 'literates'. It also reflected the speaker's social position and stature: only those with leisure and means could afford to follow the arduous course of educational progress that would lead to a correct handling of the intricacies of language as dictated by society. A good speller was one who could implicitly document a higher social status, even if his or her actual means were not in evidence. The genteel school marm with her spelling bees often exercised greater authority in the community than many a priest or judge, and the *letrado*, literally a 'literate', became the univocal appellation of one who had had the means to study one particular field of societal identification and regimentation, the law and its application.[2]

4. 'Eye-dialect' and 'I-dialect': a case in point

A particularly interesting case of self-constitution through text is found in what is often called 'the politics of transcription'. In the context of unwritten languages (or even otherwise written languages, but viewed under a special descriptive angle, such as in Conversation Analysis), the problem arises of how to transcribe the spoken word (or transliterating it, the latter especially being the case for languages having a different way of alphabetizing).

4.1. Transcription problems

Among the many problems that beset the transcriber, let me mention a few:

- there may be no recognized system of transcription available for this particular language or dialect (the SIL people's problem);
- the systems that are available are insufficient to capture

---

2. The word commonly means 'lawyer' in Spanish and can also have this meaning in Portuguese.

the features that the describer wants to highlight (here, phonetic alphabets and diacritics are of help; in other cases, home-made spellings are invented to evoke an impression of authenticity, as in the case of the 'eye-dialect', see below);

• the philosophy of, and intentions behind, the transcription may vary widely: from a purely scientific-linguistic interest to 'get all the data' to more praxis-oriented desire to control and coerce the speakers or readers (as in the case of 'sacred' languages, archaic writing systems, or professional notations).

Clearly, the choice of one particular method of transcription over another is not just a matter of technicality; it implies a choice between societal alternatives, often passing as scientific exigencies. The following is a case in point.

4.2. Transcriber's choice

When a linguist wants to buttress his arguments for a particular explanation of a foreign language phenomenon, or wishes to establish a general rule of grammar by quoting authentic examples from various languages, he or she may have to recur to transcribing the examples, in addition to providing the original text. There are conventions for such cases, depending on the formats imposed by the journal or series in which the work is going to be published. A journal such as *Language* routinely transliterates all non-Engish language examples (even for such relatively well-established alphabets as those of Russian or Classical Greek). Other journals (such as the *Journal of Pragmatics*) try, to the greatest possible extent, to furnish the reader with the original script, so as to allow for a more complete check.

The intention of the researcher, in looking for the best suited system of transcription, is to make sure that the reader is able to follow the arguments presented, and to check the evidence provided in the examples against the hypotheses proposed. In the case of speech, modern means of recording (audio or video tape) have widely replaced the earlier techniques of taking

field notes and still pictures for further treatment at home. But for a wider audience, the raw date have to be prepared and 'cooked' somehow, in order to be digested. This is where transcription recipes come in, and where also the bitterest battles are fought for the control of the transcription procedures.

If one could call the process of transcribing a way of making oral speech 'visible',[3] then this visibility is not a simple matter of 'seeing and believing'. The way the researcher 'sees' the data may be very different, not only from person to person, but also from culture to culture. When it comes to registering and checking subtle nuances of pronunciation, intonation, stress, pausation, breathing, even laughing, the techniques of transcription will never be able to replicate the original completely, not even to one whose native tongue is the same as that of the speakers in the recordings.

In Conversation Analysis(CA), there is a long tradition of transcribing, which is neither wholly conventional (like in regular spelling) nor strictly phonetic (as in an IPA-based transcription). The CA people have decided that a phonetic transcription is unnecessarily detailed, and that the traits that CA is interested in cannot be captured by such a transcription anyway (for instance, there is no IPA-recognized way of transcribing laughter). On the other hand, conventional spelling would create the illusion that people, when making conversation or otherwise producing speech, respect the laws of grammar and the injunction to 'speak as it is written' — which, as we all know, never is the case, no matter what the grammarians say.

Thus, a kind of middle way is created, by some called the 'eye dialect'. It relies on a very simple principle, namely that the native speaker, when presented with a 'divergent' form, will visually recognize this as a kind of variant proper to the speech of the conversational interactants, thereby enhancing for him-/herself the credibility and authenticity of the transcription. There are even standardized conventions for how to represent certain dialects of English and other languages: thus, the Texas

---

3. There is an earlier sense of this expression, referring to the process of decomposing speech phonetically in accordance with its various distinctive bands of frequency (the so-called 'formants'), and displaying the result visually (e.g. by means of a kymograph or its advancd variant, the sonagraph). See especially the work of David Lieberman and his colleagues in the fifties, and that of Gunnar Fant and his work group at Stockholm Technical University in the sixties.

'nasal twang' is represented by spelling such as 'thaink' for 'think' (or 'thank'—a homonym in the dialect), or the mountain people's diphthongs as 'aiggs' for 'eggs', and so on. In a Modern Greek transcription, the name *Katarina* would appear with an initial *G-* after the inflected article in the accusative: *tin Gatarina*, and so on (*cf.* Georgakopoulou, 2001). Conversation Analysis has similarly established certain conventions in this respect that everybody uses: 'have to' appears as 'hafta', 'Mrs.' as 'missuz', and so on, but apart from this, there is a great deal of freedom and creativity around.

4.3. TRANSCRIBER IDENTITY

The results of the transcription process, viewed from the point of identity, are twofold. First of all, the identities of the speakers and their speech are established with a certain degree of authenticity.[4] But there is a hidden condition here: one needs to be a native speaker oneself of the language in question, in addition to being familiar with the 'dialect' of CA that is used, in order to grasp the niceties of such a transcription. Only on this condition can the truth of what is '*seen*', the identity of the *text*, be established.

As to the identity of the '*speaker*' (here not understood as the speaker of the text, the provider of the raw data, but the person transmitting those data to us, the analyst), the use of the 'eye dialect' is a kind of 'shibboleth', a way of showing the audience that he or she has internalized the conventions of the CA method, in other words, that he or she can be trusted as an analyst. The honesty and trustworthiness of the analyst are 'indexed' by the use of this particular dialect, just like the use of a conventional 'literary' or 'stage' dialect tells us that the person speaking is truly from Texas or Kentucky. What the eye dialect does is to establish the truthfulness of the *seer*, the identity of the linguist. It is a 'meta-statement', a practice of identity.

As a corollary, one may notice that most uses of CA-type transcriptions nowadays suffer from a certain amount of 'over-kill': those trained in CA methodology either do not need the detailed transcriptions,

---

4. Observe that the words *autós* in Greek and *idem* in Latin have closely related meanings.

in addition to the easily available visual recordings, or alternatively, they will have to go back to the latter anyway (e.g. by logging on to the internet and visit the analyst's site in order to inspect the originals). The non-initiated will be baffled and not know what to make of the transcription and/or transliteration — the same thing that happens when one reads a Modern Greek text in transliterated form, for instance: superfluous for the natives (or their equivalents), opaque for the non-natives, who would be just as well served with a word-by-word rendering in addition to a current translation. Again, the eye dialect, when used in a scientific publication, serves to document, not the correctness of the transcribed conversation, but mainly the correct political identity of the transcriber.

5. Conclusion

Linguistic pragmatics is concerned with more than just the language users in their actual practice. The use of language, particularly in its deployment of writing skills (*e.g.* in alphabetization, *cf.* Port. *letramento*) implies much more than just teaching and using the alphabet. Especially in the case of emergent literacy, developing an orthographic system is more than reducing speech to a written form (*cf.* the subtitle of Kenneth Pike's 1958 work: *The technique of reducing languages to writing*). Writing creates a *pragmatic identity*: it establishes the writing individual (be he or she a 'native speaker', a born-again 'savage', a practicing linguist, or just a regular user of language) as one who has overcome the fickleness of oral delivery, and is able to give his/her words, or 'data', an 'eternal', recognized, and fixed shape.[5] While the positive effects of this 'identification' often are readily acknowledged, we should not be blind to the drawbacks that are inherent in the current beliefs about alphabetization as a step on the way to greater societal progress and to personal success for the individual language user.

---

5. This holds both for the newly converted faithful and for their equivalents in the language sciences, to wit: the true believers in Conversation Analysis (and in general, the practitioners of any new-fangled linguistic creed that is currently *en vogue*).

REFERENCES

Caffi, C. *La mitigazione. Studi di pragmatica linguistica*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2001.

Georgakopoulou, A. Arguing about the future. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 33 (5), 2001.

Hellinger, M. On writing English-related Creoles in the Caribbean. *In:* M. Görlach & J. Holm (eds.), *Focus on the Caribbean*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1986.

Le Page, R. & A. Tabouret-Keller. *Acts of identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Mendes Barros, M. C. D. Lingüística como padrão de escrita missionária. *Cadernos de Linguagem e Sociedade,* 2 (1): 27-41, 1996.

Pike, K. L. *Phonemics: The technique of reducing languages to writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1958.

Sebba, M. Informal orthographies, informal ideologies: spelling and codeswitching in British Creole. *Cadernos de Linguagem e Sociedade,* 2 (1): 85-96, 1996.