Association for Information Systems
AIS Electronic Library (AISeL)

AMCIS 1998 Proceedings

Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS)

December 1998

The Meta-linguistic Model in Information Systems Research

Robert Stephens
University of the West of England

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis1998

The Meta-linguistic Model in Information Systems Research

Robert Stephens
University of the West of England

Abstract

In this paper a meta-linguistic model in information systems research is identified, and some of its shortcomings with respect to actual language situations reviewed. It is argued that a representational commitment implicit in the model is a barrier to understanding the nature of the language/action context or of organizational work, and that more viable approaches require a responsive or reflexive model of language.

Introduction

For many years scholars have adopted philosophical positions to examine information systems practices and recommend alternative approaches. The most limited of this work applies philosophy to (or in) the domain of interest, effectively reducing philosophy to method or technique, and conceding all philosophical ground to rationalism or empiricism (Collier, 1994: 205). The most insightful adopts the Lockean recommendation that philosophy should perform the role of underlabourer, clarifying practices by examining metaphysical assumptions. All theory makes assumptions about the nature of reality (either implicitly or explicitly) and such ontological assumptions necessarily regulate methods and methodologies. In the case of IS, such assumptions also shape technologies and what designers expect them to achieve. It therefore follows that if one's ontology is incorrect, then methods, methodologies and artifacts will fail to consistently deliver, or will have effects that are not theoretically predicable or accountable. This is, in fact, a substantial part of the anti-objectivist critique of IS methods and practice.

In this paper linguistic ontology is examined. In IS this is almost universally constructed on some version of a "metalinguistic" model, whereby language use is understood as a derivative of some transcendental system or code. Again, a leading anti-objectivist critique in IS involves the correspondence of language to reality and the existence of linguistic relativism—an argument that only makes sense within this model because it demands a semiotic or representational relation. It would be reasonable to assert that although a number of competing philosophies are present in the IS field, notably positivism, empiricism, relativism and interpretivism, they broadly fall within the contemporary philosophies of objectivism and subjectivism, and it is on such disputed ground that interventions are most telling. This "metalinguistic" model is identified with both traditions, and in this paper is examined to reveal some of its unacknowledged commitments.

The Influence of Linguistics in IS Research

Surveying the history of information systems research, Klein (1996) identifies a social constructionist challenge to the hegemony of positivism and empiricism involving researchers taking an increasing "linguistic turn". Just as in social and cultural theory, this is largely inspired by hermeneutics and phenomenology, and its intellectual direction is towards an understanding of language as reality constructor, with speech act theory and semiotics supplying methodological tools. However, a linguistics is already apparent in the earlier objectivist tradition in the shape a sociological model constructed on the axioms of structural linguistics, *and* it is argued that this has been imported implicitly into the linguistic turn. As a consequence, the break with objectivist theoretical foundations has not been so categorical or complete, and that the "linguistic turn" is in danger of retaining the same disguised commitment to an unanalysed linguistic representationalism for which the earlier tradition was dismissed.

Implicitly or explicitly a linguistic model can be associated with three areas.

a) Assumptions concerning the human condition, and how these are methodologically accommodated. Language use, which pervades human activities, can be taken as a fairly universal IS topic because of the communicative potential of technologies, because the core activities in IS development, analysis and design, are conducted and constructed linguistically, and because key target areas for IS such as organizations and communities are characterized by communication.

b) Techniques and technologies inspired by models of language use. The most common is the Saussurian analytic distinction between form and content as, for example, in semantic data models (e.g., Chen, 1976), but more recently Austin and Searle"s proposals on speech acts have found their place in both methodology (e.g. Lyytinen, 1985) and technology (e.g. Winograd and Flores, 1986).

c) Reflective studies of information technology and systems. Although primarily associated with specialisms such as Artificial Intelligence, Knowledge-based Systems and Computer Supported Cooperative Work, the concept of *representation* is emerging as a key topic in IS (Suchman, 1995). Generally implicated with culture, and often taken to be about shared meanings and understandings, a *representational system* (e.g., sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, objects, etc.) can convey or mediate action, acts, thoughts, ideas and feelings.

The linguistic ontology of these three areas is almost universally constructed on some version of a "metalinguistic" model, whereby language use is understood as a derivative or surrogate for something else, often a transcendental system or code. Again,

a leading anti-objectivist critique in IS involves the correspondence of language to reality and the existence of linguistic relativism - an argument that only makes sense within this model because it demands a semiotic or representational relation. It would be reasonable to assert that although a number of competing philosophies are present in the IS field, notably positivism, empiricism, relativism and interpretivism, they broadly fall within the contemporary philosophies of objectivism and subjectivism, and it is on such disputed ground that philosophical interventions are most telling. This "metalinguistic" model is identified with both traditions.

Metalinguistics is designed to reflect on language situations, particularly speech, in a *disciplined* way, by applying various theories of a systems of signs and symbols, speech acts, cognitive semantics, ideational states, and so on. The structure of the theoretical move, however, is important, for to achieve the stable object a theory demands the living event of language must be segregated, condensed and displaced, and then reworked with the disciplines of abstraction, abbreviation and aggregation that the metalinguist introduces. No matter how it is then (re)presented something crucial must be left out, because as Billig (1987) has claimed, every properly social context is dilemmatic; that is, a context structured by the possibility of the activities within it allowing criticism and/or requiring justification, and in which people must adopt a rhetorical or argumentative position in what is always at least a two-sided controversy.

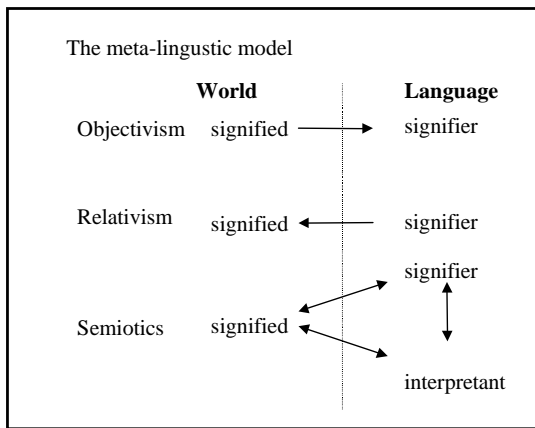## Problems with the Meta-linguistic Model

In a distinctive critique, Bourdieu, attacks sociology in particular (especially structuralism), and social sciences in general, for a methodologically uncontrolled application of linguistic principles worked out by Saussure, and latterly Chomsky. The problem for Bourdieu is that by constituting language as an autonomous and homogenous object to make it amenable to linguistic analysis, the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, or *competence* and *performance*, leads to the uncritical adoption of an objective domain which is in fact the product of a complex set of social, historical and political conditions of formation. Bourdieu invokes Austin"s speech act theory to insist that the efficacy of performative utterances is inseparable from the existence of an *institution* which defines the conditions (e.g., place, time, agent) that must be fulfilled in order for the utterance to be effective. Institution is used here in a very general sense, (e.g. for IS researchers it may be organization, hospital, factory or work group), but is any relatively durable set of social relations which *endows* individuals with power, status and resources of various kinds, and thereby granting the speaker with the authority to carry out the act which his or her utterance claims to perform. Hence the efficacy of the performative utterance presupposes a set of social relations, an institution, by virtue of which a particular individual, who is *authorized* to speak and *recognized* as such by others, is able to speak in a way that others will regard as acceptable in the circumstances.

It could be argued that by adopting a "language-action approach" and focusing on the performative aspects of language, this reduction is avoided. However, the source of the problem lies in the very positing of a system or code that is drawn upon by speakers, or identified by researchers, that is curiously *of* the world, but not *in* the world (*pace* Descartes). The inevitable product of the methodological constitution of an abstract linguistic domain that is simultaneously "real" and "ideal", is some form of representational model of language that is drawn upon in the production of mundane action or language, and that can be identified by a diligent observer, but which is nonetheless autonomous of the social relations Bourdieu is concerned with. Whether it is speech acts, mental or ideational states, or "things in the real world", that are being indexed does not matter here, for the shape of the model remains that shown in the figure at the end of the paper (the arrows indicating semantic attributions). What begins as a methodological principle is then reworked into an account of the way language actually works, namely that it is based upon some underlying system which is actualized in each speech act. The apparent methodological principle, that of separating structure from process, becomes solidified in a way that tends to abstract the "system" of a language from its evolving historical actuality. Having separated language from its context of use by objectifying it for analysis according to the researcher"s terms, the metalinguistic requirement is then to put the two back together again, which can only be done referentially, and most problematically, according to the researcher"s terms.

It is here that Bourdieu is concerned to demonstrate that whatever power or force speech acts possess is a power or force ascribed to them only by the social institution of which the utterance of the speech act is part. Although this social institution is likely to be the target of interest for the IS researcher a methodological challenge is posed, because any speech act has identity by virtue of the social relations prevailing between the speaker and hearer, and these will, *ipso facto*, be different between academic observer and the speech situation of interest and those of the object domain itself. Thus, academic descriptions of action tend to reify the product or outcome of speech situations as the components of action, effectively compressing or deleting the time and agency of their production. Such "official accounts" produce distorted understandings of the resources available for action by reifying and overemphasizing academic concerns for abstraction, ideals, norms, values, etc., and placing closure on what will probably be an open-ended and contested situation. In particular, elements integral to practice and language action such as "style", "tact", "dexterity", "savior-faire" (skill, etiquette), but especially, "improvisation", "misfires", and "strategies" are omitted from this model.

Conclusion

The metalinguistic model presupposes signs and sign systems exist apart from and prior to the communicational purposes to which they may or may not be put, but this naturalization of the sign conceals what could be called "rights of audience"; the

The meta-linguistic model

	World		**Language**
Objectivism	signified	⟶	signifier
Relativism	signified	⟵	signifier
Semiotics	signified	⟵	signifier ↕ interpretant

prior commitment to some form of meaning residing in the linguistic system ultimately leaves the circumstances of actual speech contexts, and thus the meaning of *actual* speech acts, unanalysable.

A central fault of the Western tradition of the meta-linguistic framework is to treat linguistic reflexivity as parasitic upon a more basic non-reflexive function of language, something extra to the primary purposes words serve (Harris, 1996: 162). These primary purposes, allegedly, have to do with the world that lies beyond language and exists independently of it. But this idea of language as a *medium of representation,* apparent in both objectivism (correspondence) and inter-pretavism (cognitive or social), covertly introduces an almost pictorial model of the type robustly critiqued by Wittgenstein (1953). This representational model of language misunderstands the relationship between language and social reality by separating them. Indeed, even proposing that there is a relationship in this manner misunderstands the concepts of "language" and "reality".

A further problem is that the linguistically orientated researcher must adopt a position of observer or spectator, yet to apprehend linguistic meanings at all demands linguistic engagement; as Bakhtin (1981) has argued, if something is to be meaningful, then there is "no alibi" on the part of the researcher from intense, interested activity and perspective. Hence, reflexivity is not only marginalized and indeed only accommodated at all by the expedient of treating the name itself as a separate, independently existing object, but the inherent responsivity of language is denied any place in the linguistic ontology. It is to posit an ontology of normative meanings that are intrinsic to a *linguistic* rather than a *social* system, because the linguistic system is the ultimate arbiter. And it is to perpetuate one of the many of the pernicious dualisms (that of language and the world) that haunt social science (see Fay, 1996: chapter 11), and by implication information systems, because a substantivist and static conception is imposed on what is about human relations and processes.

The real need is to understand the nature of language. Both Wittgenstein and Bakhtin saw this as something that lacks an essence and recommended disposing of ideas that proposed any homogeneity of language. A genuine "linguistic turn" could resist this reduction by reversing the ontological primacy of the sign and treating language action itself as irreducibly responsive (Bakhtin, 1981), reflexive and integrational (Harris, 1996), or as articulate contact (Stewart, 1995). Where these signs "come from" in particular cases can then be left as an open question for investigation.

References

References available on request.