The relevance of language for social psychology

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Of the numerous themes that straddle social psychology one has always struck me as a perennial intellectual challenge and problem from a relatively early date on. The challenge is simply the question of how one reconciles the individual and social levels of analyses. The tension between the individual and the social constitutes not only a creative tension but it is also the source of an intellectual chasm within social psychology. It is a question that has been raised and addressed in many different historical contexts (see Semin, 1986). Early attempts to resolve this duality are to be found in the Völkerpsychologie-tradition that was established by Lazarus and Steinhal (1860) and others (Lazarus, 1861; Waitz, 1859; Wedewer, 1860, inter alia). This then newly emerging

'discipline' consisted in an attempt to introduce a level of analysis that would be more encompassing than the one prevailing in the psychology of the mid nineteenth Century. More recently, this debate was initiated during the early and mid-seventies in social psychology (e.g., Israel & Tajfel, 1972). The intellectual chasm can be found in the fact that the very same tension is at the heart of many of the debates that has led to major divisions experienced by contemporary social psychology - particularly European social psychology. It is also at the core of some of the recent divisions that have emerged theoretically and methodologically (Gergen, 1985; Harré & Secord, 1972, inter alia).

The question itself is relatively simple - how does one reconcile the individualist level of analysis in a branch of psychology that is expected if not supposed to address the 'social', and not merely, individual functioning. The way this has been dealt within mainstream social psychology is by retaining a type of dualism that is inherent in a methodological commitment to individual reductionism (cf. Moscovici, 1984; Tajfel, 1972; Sampson, 1981, inter alia). This commitment is accompanied by a tacit assumption about the existence of 'society' outside of the individual.

In the following, I would like to start by drawing attention to a particular paradox that has emerged in social psychology as a consequence of this methodological commitment to individual and the absenting of the social. I single out this particular example, since it allows me to use language as an illustrative way out of the duality created by the individual and the social levels of analyses and it also provides me to elaborate on the important and central role that language has as yet to come to play in an emergent social psychology.

The Paradox: Social psychology is often defined as the analysis and explanation of social behaviour (cf. Kimble, 1990, p. 2; Sears, Peplau & Taylor, 1991, p. 2; Sabini, 1992, p. 1, inter alia). And yet, the prominent focus in mainstream social psychology is and has, for a long time been on the analysis and explanation of intra-psychological processes (cognitive and affective). As Marcus and Zajonc (1985) have pointed out "Social psychology and cognitive social psychology are today nearly synonymous. The cognitive approach is now clearly the dominant approach among social psychologists, having virtually no competitors" (Marcus & Zajonc, 1985, p. 137). Although this statement is over ten years old this situation has not changed dramatically. Even in the analysis of intergroup processes and self-categorisation the focus is primarily on a tradition of cognitive processes and one can argue, as some have, that central theories in this field are "a prime candidate for reduction to 'basic' information processing laws" (Tetlock, 1986, p. 255; Jahoda, 1986). The paradox comes about through the fact that while the goal is to explain social behavior, the persistent methodological commitment has been to the processes or properties of individual agents. In other words, the methodological commitment has been

to <u>intra-psychological processes rather than social behavior</u> (inter-psychological processes) <u>or even the interface between these two</u>. What is and has been missing is a conceptual loop that brings the two disparate chains into some coherent interface and that is empirically examinable. Such a change also requires a shift in methodological commitment from that of the individual to that of the social.

It is in this context that one has to start thinking about what it is that enables social behaviour and interaction. The answer is simple enough: <u>Symbolic communication</u> which can takes place by means of verbal or non-verbal symbols - G. H. Mead established this much some time ago (e.g., 1934). Indeed, Meadian social psychology treated forms of language as the mediators not only of cognition and consciousness but of the self and social interaction (cf. Rock, 1979, p. 111 ff.); an issue that is beginning to attract renewed attention in the context of socio-cultural theory and semiotic mediation (e.g., Wertsch, 1991).

I would like to argue here that the absence of a fruitful link between inter-psychological and intra-psychological processes has primarily been due to the fact that in contrast to the analysis of intra-psychological processes, to date, <u>we have not developed a handle on symbolic communication that allows us to make it amenable to systematic analysis.</u>

In principle, developing such a handle on social behaviour is, first of all, to advance an approach to language and thus symbolic communication that could furnish the analysis of inter-psychological processes with a privileged theoretical and empirical status. With privileged I mean a conceptual status that facilitates its analysis and empirical examination in a manner analogue to that afforded with intra-psychological processes. Not only that, I also mean a status that allows to interface the inter-psychological (social behaviour) with the intra-psychological in a meaningful way so that the interactive relation between the two types of processes can be sensibly examined.

This argument is in itself not new. Pointing out the relevance of language for social psychology has been a fashionable argument in the social sciences and some of the more critical approaches to social psychology in particular and psychology in general (e.g., social constructionism, etc.). Unfortunately, these critical reflections upon the import of language to social psychological processes have remained policy statements without much if any systematic research ensuing upon them. Most of the work has remained descriptive and has been unable to link the inter-psychological with the intra-psychological. The difference between these approaches and the orientation represented here is that the current orientation proposes as link between the inter-psychological and the intra-

psychological (cf. Semin, 1995). This is not necessarily an easy argument since it requires some rethinking about the way we consider language and cognition.

The centrality of language for symbolic communication: Symbolic communication by which social interaction is maintained is a complex medium and its complexity has made it difficult to treat it such that it is accessible to systematic and objective analysis that is commonly regarded as the road to a science. It is no doubt the case that physical interactions without verbal exchange are a rarity. It would certainly appear to be correct if one were to say that the somewhat direct forms of physical interactions are increasingly being replaced by verbal and other relatively abstract forms of interaction and exchange particularly in the emerging form of late 20th Century society, which can be best described as an "information culture". It is primarily in the form of words that information about human interactions and other events is communicated and stored. We live in a world where words have in fact taken over from behaviours in terms of physical or non-verbal communication. Indeed, we were on the way of loosing our reliance on non-verbal communication the moment humanity tripped over the fact that words can capture more complex forms of reality and abstract them in a more economical manner. Words have in the mean time become a weapon in an information society that is in fact growingly becoming incapable of dealing with non-verbal action[2]. We plan, broker, initiate, guide, bully, love, terrorise, terminate, justify or challenge through words. It is in words that we engage in social interaction and it is through a better understanding of words and their use that we can begin to appreciate social behaviour. Much of our behaviour essentially involves communication and is manifested in language use. Thus, studying language may contribute to unfolding inter-psychological processes.

But if words are the means by which social behaviour is realised then an analysis of symbolic communication must begin with an approach that makes language accessible to an objective analysis. It is to this point that I now turn. This is relatively important since it constitutes a manner in which one can address the entire circle of social interaction taking into account the intra- as well as inter-psychological processes in the analysis of social psychological phenomena.

Symbolic communication as tool use: The idea or metaphor that language is a tool upon which knowledge is mapped is critical to the development of this perspective. I use this analogy expressly to invite you to think about linguistic devices such as verbs, adjectives and nouns very much in the way in which one would think about hammers, saws and pliers. These tools, which are feats of centuries of engineering are not only the products of experience and knowledge, they also represent this knowledge. There is no doubt that I can splice a piece of wood into two with a hammer, but a saw is a more sophisticated tool engineered for this purpose. Indeed, I can push a nail into wood with the end of a saw, but

a hammer is a more appropriate tool to do so. Yet, certain hammers have other properties. They are also suitable to extract nails, and so on. These special tools contain the distilled knowledge about the relationship between a task and the best fit between a task or goal and human propensities (in particular physical ones, namely, movement, handling, vision, etc.)

One task that the 'language as a tool' metaphor entails is to examine and reveal the distinctive properties of such tools. In the case of interpersonal language, the <u>first</u> step for such a task is to identify the types of tools that are available. The <u>second</u> step is to determine the particular jobs for which such tools have been tailored. Obviously, these two steps are not independent from each other. We are able to identify properties of tools such as hammers, saws and pliers more readily because the match between task, tool and movement is more discernible. In contrast, the properties of linguistic tools are not so transparent. This is specially because language, in most of its facets (apart from its surface semantics), constitutes what Polanyi (1956) termed 'tacit knowledge'. Its properties are implicit.

The first type of research (examining the properties of tools) is, by definition, decontextualized in that it focuses on "language" in the abstract. Therefore, it does not constitute an investigation of 'language in use', or "speech" (cf. de Saussure, 1914; Riceour, 1954). 'Language-in-use' is the medium of communication <u>par</u> <u>excellence</u>. This is the subject of the second type of research in which I would like to use in order to illustrate different possibilities of interfacing the inter- and intra-psychological. In the latter case the research questions are, among other things, about the strategic use of tools to communicate our intentions and goals in discourse; how such communication impacts others.

<u>An Approach to the Tools of Interpersonal Language</u>: The analysis of the tools of interpersonal language is in the first instance a decontextualized one. This approach is informed by a distinction that is widely shared and regarded as one of the central contributions by Ferdinant de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev, namely the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, or language and speech. There exist a number of other distinctions that mimic the relationship between language as an abstract property of a linguistic community of speakers and its use, namely language and discourse, code and message (cf. Riceour, 1971) or pragmatic and semantic meaning contexts (Douglas, 1971; Meertz, 1985, inter alia). What is the relationship between language and speech? The answer to this question provides us a rationale of examining interpersonal tools separately from their use in everyday contexts. In order to be able to communicate an intention, experience, idea wish or desire, I have to access a medium that is "objective", namely shared and detached from each and every persons'. In Vygotski's terms: "In order to transmit some experience or content of consciousness to another person, there is no other

path than to ascribe the content to a known class, to a known group of phenomena, and as we know this necessarily requires generalisation. Thus, it turns out that social interaction necessarily presupposes generalisation and the development of word meaning, i.e., generalisation becomes possible with the development of social interaction" (Vygotski, 1956/1987, p. 48-49). Thus, if you were to read the sentence "The sun is rising" then you know what it "means". But consider different contexts in which the same sentence is uttered by (1)one of two spies in the process of bugging an embassy office; (2) a couple in bed, who are married to different people; or (3) a farmer's wife to her husband. The sentence acquires different rhetorical qualities as a function of context and conveys completely different meanings. Respectively: (for the spies: "We must get out soon"; (2) for the couple: "My spouse may be coming back any time now", and; (3)for the farmers: "Its time to feed the animals", etc. But the sentence also carries a power in vacuo, a certain invariance, which is how you understood in reading it the first time without a context, namely "*The sun is rising" - full stop*. This is the distinction that is referred to by some as the difference between the pragmatic and semantic value or meaning. "Pragmatic meaning is defined as meaning that is dependent on context, while the semantic value of a sign is the meaning, or notional core, that it has apart from contextual factors" (Meertz, 1985, p. 5). The decontextualized semantic value of words function as powerful invariant linguistic tools which in their variable strategic use convey what is referred to as indexical information (Bar-Hillel, 1955; Garfinkel, 1967; Mehan & Wood, 1975). Thus, an analysis of the tools of interpersonal language acquires some importance, since without an understanding of their properties it is difficult to understand their significance in use contexts. Three questions arise in this context, namely (a) What are the features of the sentence 'The sun is rising.', in the abstract, in contrast to its utterance in the context of an embassy bugging, etc., in other words, between 'language' and 'speech'?; (b) Related to (a), what are the features of the abstracted medium that I am accessing when I am communicating, and finally; (c) How is the sentence uttered 'in vacuum' made meaningful in distinct and different way from the sentence being uttered in a very specific context?

As Ricoeur (1979) argues, language as a system is "virtual and outside of time" (p. 530); it has no subject, that is the sentence 'The sun is rising.', on its own, does not evoke the question 'Who is speaking?'; the words and properties of such sentences can be understood with reference to language as a system; and what is more, language as a system (e.g., syntax, semantics) is the "condition for communication" (p. 531). That is, whereas language is timeless, without a subject and without a world, speech takes place in time; refers to its speakers (has subjectivity) and refer to as world and of course involves interlocutors. Thus, the knowledge represented in language is virtually "every persons' ", in that it is anonymous, 'objective' and detached form contextual circumstances (i.e., personal, situational, etc.) and it facilitates the "reciprocity of perspectives through its

detachment from the uniqueness of the individuals involved" (Semin & Manstead, 1979). In this context, it is important not to forget that language is the condition for speech and communication[3].

The Tools of Interpersonal Communication: The analysis of the tools of interpersonal communication addresses the identification of the linguistic devices by which we characterise, describe and classify social interaction and its actors. In principle, one can look at any communicative act in a number of different ways: its manifest content, its structural and mechanical characteristics; the types of tools that are used; the meta-semantic properties of such tools, etc. A research field that I have been engaged in for some time set out explicitly to identify categories of interpersonal terms as tools of communication about persons, their relationships and interactions. The aim of such work is to then analyse the properties of such tools. Summarily, one can describe this research as comprising of getting a systematic handle upon interpersonal language by proceeding through the following three steps: (1) developing a taxonomy or classification of the tools of interpersonal language; (2) identifying the type of knowledge that is systematically mapped or coded in interpersonal language (e.g., the types of cognitive inferences that are systematically mediated by these tools); and, finally (3) to identify the uses that they can be put to.

Let me provide a brief overview of some of the work we have done to illustrate these points (cf. Semin & Greenslade, 1985; Semin & Fiedler, 1991; Semin & Marsman, 1994). Our aim was to develop a framework that would enable us to analyse how interpersonal language marks both the features of social interaction and the properties of persons. To this end, we began by identifying a number of convergent linguistic criteria by means of which it was possible to systematically differentiate between different types of interpersonal verbs and adjectives[4].

Why is it relevant to analyse the properties of these linguistic devices or tools? Earlier on, when I gave the example of tools I referred to linguistic devices in much the same way as one would to saws, hammers, screw drivers, etc. There are particular purposes for which saws are suitable and others for which hammers are appropriate. The way in which these tools are designed represents the knowledge that has been accumulated and invested over centuries. One can therefore speak of the cognitive properties of such tools. Similarly, in using language, one makes (mostly unconsciously) strategic choices about the most suitable word or words to achieve or realise the goal or purpose one has in mind. Properties of tools refers to the types of things that one can do with such tools, that is their cognitive properties (cf. Semin, 1995) which define the range of things that are possible. Tools are not arbitrarily usable and are optimally suited for some tasks but not all.

For instance, if I find out that verbs depicting actions focus the origin of the action (help, cheat, amuse) upon the sentence subject and verbs depicting states (like, hate, admire) focus the origin of the event to the sentence object then I have an idea of a systematic cognitive property of the tool (Semin, 1995). Given a particular event, I can use different linguistic categories to depict it in a sentence (e.g., a - John hit David; b -John hurt David, c - John hates David; or, d - John is aggressive). If I know that the verbs in sentences a and b focus the origin of the depicted event to John and in sentence c to David, then I have a clear idea of what the different linguistic tools can do in symbolic communication. Such an analysis of the cognitive properties of linguistic tools reverses a persistent methodological commitment of psychological research. It means a shift of attention from processes or properties that are attributed to individual agents to the properties of the tools by which social communication and interaction are enabled. Therefore, this step, namely analysing the cognitive properties of tools (not individuals) constitutes an important step towards privileging the status of the inter-psychological in social psychology.

Next, I shall illustrate how knowledge of such tools allows to examine not only their strategic use in communicative contexts but also how knowledge of tool properties allows to infer the cognitive processes that systematically mediate strategic communication. There are a few fields in which such strategic language use has been demonstrated (e.g., de Poot & Semin, 1995; Semin, Rubini & Fiedler, 1995; Semin & de Poot, 1996), but I shall in the following focus on the work of Anne Maass and her colleagues to illustrate the point about strategic language use as tool use in the context of stereotypes and their communication.

The strategic use of tools in communicative contexts - the case of stereotype transmission: It is possible to investigate how people use language in a strategic manner to communicate stereotypes in a rather and even subconscious manner (cf. Franco & Maass, 1996) only when one has a clear idea of the cognitive properties of the tools that are employed in the interpersonal domain. This is very much like deciphering the implicational meanings of a secret language. Such a deciphering reveals why particular tools are used in particular contexts and for what purpose. It is not only possible to examine why particular tools are used but also what types of cognitive implications they are expected to mediate and thus which types of effects or influence the produced verbal behavior is intended to have. This means that a systematic knowledge of the tools used in communication reveals three psychologically important aspects of inter-psychological processes which are never revealed by a methodological commitment to the individual. These are: (a) what are the motives of the person communicating a stereotype; (b) what strategic decisions does such a person make in order to convey a particular intended content and goal, and finally (c) what function does such a communicative composition have?

An added advantage of the precise understanding of the implications of interpersonal tools is the precise quantitative objectification of verbal behaviour that is also a reliable method. The research on the transmission and maintenance of stereotyping is a well-researched phenomenon, namely the so-called Linguistic Intergroup Bias, introduced by Maass and her colleagues (Maass & Arcuri, 1992; Maass, Arcuri, Salvi and Semin, 1989; Maass, Milesi, Zabbini and Stahlberg, 1994; Fiedler, Semin & Finkenauer, 1993; Rubini & Semin, 1994, inter alia).

This research question is about how positive perceptions of the in-group and negative perceptions of an out-group are not only maintained in the face of contradictory evidence, but how they are transmitted. The emphasis is on transmitted - namely, what are the types of verbal behaviours that are manifested in order to achieve or influence specific types of intra-psychological ends? The main argument that is used by the linguistic intergroup bias approach is that positive behaviours when they are performed by the in-group lead to descriptions of such behaviours with more abstract predicates (e.g., "She is helpful and kind"). In contrast, if the same behaviour is performed by an out-group member, then the same behaviour is described with concrete predicates (e.g., she held the door open for somebody). The reverse is the case with negative behaviours. When such a behavior is performed by an in-group member, then concrete predicates are used to describe the behaviour (e.g., "She insulted somebody"). However, if the same negative behaviour is performed by an out-group member then an abstract predicate is more likely to be used (e.g., "She is rude or aggressive").

In principle, any given event could be described at any level of predicate use identified in the Linguistic Category Model (see Semin & Fielder, 1991). Thus, a particular event of aggression can be described as 'John punched David", or 'John hurts David', 'John hates David", or 'John is violent or aggressive'. There are two points that are relevant given the choice that is available. The first one is that, as the research on this subject shows, predicate choice in describing such behaviours as a function of group membership is not random. More importantly, that the choice of predicates conveys something more than the mere surface semantics. The more abstract predicate choice implies greater stability of the behaviour in question and higher likelihood of the behaviour being repeated in the future. Thus, if one is confronted with a positive behaviour of an out-group member, then predicate choice in describing such behaviour becomes critical. One does not wish to convey an impression of denying reality or denigrating it. Thus, the best possible choice is to use tools that convey the impression that the event was situated, particularistic and temporary and not open one's self to challenge. In contrast, the same behaviour performed by an in-group is conveyed with abstract predicates, conveying the impression of a positive feature that is a stable characteristic of the in-group member.

The first set of experiments (Maass, Salvi, Arcuri & Semin, 1989) used members of competing real life groups in a horse race competition in Ferrara (Italy). In two critical experiments utilising different dependent measures, (including open-ended descriptions of positive and negative behaviours of in- and out-group members), it was shown that people use more abstract predicates when describing positive in-group and negative out-group behaviours and more concrete predicates when describing positive out-group and negative in-group behaviours.

This phenomenon has been demonstrated in a number of different contexts and settings such as sports teams, nations (Arcuri, Maass & Portabello, 1994). political groups (Rubini & Semin, 1994) and in mass media reports (Maass, Corvino & Arcuri, 1994). The more recent developments on this research have been concerned with making differential predictions about the types of intra-psychological processes that may be responsible for the generation of specific strategic tool choices in order to subtly transmit stereotypes (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini & Stahlberg, 1994). The contrasting models that have been examined are between an expectancy versus in-group-protective motivational based predictions. Thus, the question has become whether the particular verbal behaviours in question is driven by cognitive or motivational factors (cf. Rubini & Semin, 1994). The expectancy based model predicts that expectancy congruent behaviour, irrespective of whether the behaviour in question is positive or negative and irrespective of whether or not it is performed by the in-group or the out-group will be described in abstract terms. Thus, if Italians regard themselves as lazy (a negative property) then such behaviour that is typically classifiable as lazy will be described with abstract predicates although it is regarded as a negative characteristic. Similarly, if the out-group performs a behavior that is regarded as positive but typical then this also will be communicated with the use of abstract predicates. In contrast, unexpected or surprising behaviour will be described in concrete terms. The opposite predictions are derivable from a motivational perspective. One possible implication of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory is that LIB reflects an in-group protective motivation. This perspective, in contrast to the differential expectancy model suggests that irrespective of expectancies LIB will occur as a function of the valence of the behaviors in question. Indeed, Maass, Milesi, Zabbini and Stahlberg (1994) in a series of three experiments find support for the expectancy hypothesis rather than the in-group protective motivation notion. However, more recently, Maass and Stahlberg (1993) have reported that under conditions where intergroup competition is high and salient one finds that the Linguistic Intergroup Bias is more pronounced than the differential expectancies condition. Taken together Maass and Stahlberg (1993) suggest that differential expectations are sufficient to produce the Linguistic Intergroup Bias. However, under heightened intergroup competition conditions the in-group-protective motivation increases this effect. They could show that there is a correlation between the

degree to which the bias is manifested and self esteem. More importantly, their research extends the applicability of this bias, with qualifications, from the inter-group context to inter-individual relationships, namely verbal exchange about 'friends' and 'enemies'.

These studies taken altogether constitute a programmatic attempt to investigate the processes that are involved in the translation of specific intra-psychological processes into a medium: namely, language and language use. Their aim and design is to demonstrate how particular intra-psychological processes lead to strategic tool use with the purpose of conveying preferences that can effect the recipient of the message. This step, namely the step of how and whether the strategic use of tools influence the recipient of the message have as yet not been analysed empirically in the context of LIB. The process of strategic language use and its influence upon a recipient has also been analysed systematically in a different context, namely how strategic word choice in the formulation of questions can influence a respondent's answers without their awareness (cf. Semin & de Poot, 1996; Semin, Rubini & Fiedler, 1995, inter alia).

The relevance of language for social psychology: Conclusions: There is no doubt that the importance of language for social psychology has been recognised relatively early on. Indeed, if one regards attribution theory as one of the most successful conceptual frameworks that has dominated social psychology for a considerable period of time, then one has to realise that this was based on Heider's (1956) original, careful and insightful analyses of language in his volume on "The psychology of interpersonal relations". His detailed analysis of a number of specific linguistic expression that are highly relevant to the interpersonal domain were primarily interpreted in a Zeitgeist which had a methodological commitment to the individual and therefore had to disregard the analysis of powerful linguistic devices. If it is the case that the purpose of social psychology is to examine the establishment of a social reality and inter-psychological processes then an important task is to investigate the glue that holds persons together in communication. It is this persistent message, that has been signalled from the early 19th Century psychologists who were concerned with Völkerpsychologie to the inspirational work on language and interpersonal relations by Heider that we, in my view, have to take more seriously. Language and its strategic use is the paramount social reality within which all social psychological process take place, are manifested and managed. It is the pursuit of the subtle but fascinating properties of this medium which brings us together, by which we cheat or influence each other. It is the medium through which we gossip or prejudge others, argue help,. advise. Language is the most generally authorised artefact for which there are no individual authors. It is therefore one of the best instances of that aspect of our lives that is truly social and without which we would not be able to experience and communicate our subjective existences. it is words that are the most important glue of social behavior and it

is the chemical composition of this glue that we have to understand better if we want to develop a social psychology that is attentive to an important aspect of what it means to be social.

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Footnotes:

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[2] Indeed, non-verbal action or non representational behaviour is the undoing of the information culture which we live in.

[3] Indeed, to the extent that language is a condition for speech, discourse or communication, it is also reproduced in any speech event. As Giddens (1976) points out: "Language exists as a 'structure', syntactical and semantic, only in so far as there are some kind of traceable consistencies in what people say, in the speech acts which they perform. From this aspect to refer to rules of syntax, for example, is to refer to the reproduction of 'like elements'; on the other hand, such rules generate the totality of speech acts which is the spoken language. It is this dual aspect of structure, as both inferred from observations of human doings, and yet as also operating as a medium whereby these doings are made possible, that has to be grasped through the notions of structuration and reproduction" (pp. 121-122, emphasis in the original).

[4] This procedure circumvents the problem of circularity in defining categories by psychological criteria alone.