

## **COGNITIVE VERSUS SOCIAL ASPECTS OF PRAGMATIC MEANING: ON THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTIFYING THE SUBJECT AS AN ETHICAL AGENT**

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- **ABSTRACT:** Is it possible to reconcile the cognitive and the social aspects of pragmatic meaning? Or could it be that the two are doomed forever to be locked in a perennial tug-of-war? I argue in this paper that the radical versions of both these theses are faulty for the same reason: viz, that of seeking to capture in a handful of deterministic rules everything that takes place at the pragmatic level. Furthermore, I argue that there is an urgent need to look upon the subject of language as a conscientious agent just as much as a person endowed with consciousness. In other words, the ethical question is invariably present in the confrontation between the cognitive and the social.
- **KEYWORDS:** Pragmatic meaning; cognitivism; social aspect; ethics.

To ask whether the cognitive and the social aspects of pragmatic meaning can both be accommodated within the framework of a single, overarching theory is to conduct the discussion against the backdrop of the common suspicion that there may be some fundamental and irreducible incompatibility between the two orientations. To be sure, this widespread suspicion has been, over the years, aided and abetted by a number of recent as well as not-so-recent developments. In the way

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the battle lines have been drawn, say, over the last half a century or so, there is little room for any negotiated peace settlement or even an uneasy truce. And the reason why the twain seems never to meet is that the advocates of the two theoretical stances have often been at pains to state their respective positions in all or none terms. Neither side is willing to look into the possibility of there being a middle ground or, for that matter, a "no man's land".

Radical cognitivists take their lead from a venerable tradition in thinking about language that posits the individual's psyche as the seat and bed-rock of language. Typical of the cognitivist stance is the following assertion made by Whitney (1827-1894) more than a century ago:

There can be asked respecting language no other question of a more elementary and at the same time of a more fundamentally important character than this: how is language obtained by us? how does each speaking individual become possessed of his speech? Its true answer involves and determines well-nigh the whole of linguistic philosophy. (1875 [1979] p.87)

For the contemporary radical cognitivists like Pinker (Pinker, 1994), the social aspect of language is interesting, no doubt, but is by no means of the essence as far as human linguistic capacity is concerned. What is interesting, they say, invoking the authority of none other than Noam Chomsky – the man primarily responsible for the mentalist backlash in linguistics, is that it is all stored in the brain of the individual, a good deal of it having been already inherited as part of Man's genetic endowment. Communication among persons similarly endowed is simply and straightforwardly a fall-out from this genetic disposition and any attempt to bring the issue of communication to centre stage in our attempt to understand language is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. Chomsky (1977, p.87) is categorical when he says:

There is no reason to believe ... that language "essentially" serves instrumental ends, or that the "essential purpose" of language is "communication", as is often said, at least if we mean by "communication" something like transmitting information or inducing belief.

Societal pragmatists, on their part, have a hard time overcoming their urge to meet the challenge of cognitivists on the latter's chosen turf. Some "radical societalists" are likely to react point blank by saying that the so-called individual is a mare's nest. The individual has no indi-

viduality other than the one vouchsafed her by the social order of which she forms a part. The individual is, in other words, a derived category, and not a primitive concept as the cognitivists seem to assume. Heidegger's famous dictum "Language speaks us," they hasten to add, is a case in point. In Borutti's (1984, p.441) paraphrase, "subjects don't use the language, they are *used* by it: that is, they are the effects of their discourses". And so is Althusser's idea of the subjects of languages as totally and irrecoverably subjected and subjugated pawns in an elaborate chess-game over which they have no control whatsoever.

Now, it is important to stress that both cognitivists and societalists are potential victims of the very same danger of exaggerated scientism when they advocate radical versions of their respective positions. This point may not be immediately obvious, but is nonetheless fairly easy to shore up. Part of the appeal of cognitivism is its claim to rigorous standards of scientificity. Jacob Mey (1993, p.286), a relentless advocate of societalism in pragmatics, has been quick to point that cognitivism's immense appeal and the mainstream status it has traditionally enjoyed are largely due to the linguists' proverbial eagerness to define their field as a "pure" science in opposition to what are often pejoratively dismissed as "social" and "applied" sciences. Mey is absolutely right in suspecting that the reason why many linguists shy away from the social character of pragmatic meanings is that they fear having to deal with far too many variables that are, in addition, somehow hopelessly "slippery" and the consequent loss of predictive rigour. In other words, looking at language as a biologically inherited phenomenon contained in the individual's psyche is a lot less "messy" than the alternative of looking at it as a social phenomenon, subject to all manner of extraneous influences. I also fully endorse Mey's implied suggestion that if the inalienably social nature of language cannot be adequately handled with the explanatory resources of an algorithm, then so much the worse for the theory that attempts to do so.

But care should be taken not to overstate the case in defence of societal pragmatics. For precious little is gained by simply reversing the priorities and insisting that the social order tells us all we need to know about the subject of language. Radical societalism is prompted by the very same urge to force the phenomenon of language into the grid of a neat algorithm, even if that algorithm turns out, on closer inspection, to be more of a Procrustean bed. The idea that language and society may be implicated in each other in ways that preclude the possibility of sta-

ting the relationship by means of unidirectional causal links is simply not considered by radical societalists in their eagerness to challenge the cognitivists' claim of the primacy of language and put forward their own claim of the primacy of the social order. This is because the model of "pure" science they have in mind – and which they share with their cognitivist adversaries – has no room for "reciprocal causality". The tenacity with which the very possibility of reciprocal causality is shunned and frequently spurned by those who invoke the paradigm of pure sciences is best illustrated by one of the earliest criticisms directed at Basil Bernstein's famous distinction between "restricted" and "elaborated" codes. Here is how it goes: "According to Bernstein, the code (the linguistic rule system) is capable of producing 'n number of speech codes' which must satisfy its rules ... These speech codes are realised through the system of social relationships, of which they are a function" (Dittmar, 1976, p.9). In other words, the central thrust of the criticism is that  $x$  is a function of  $y$  which in turn is taken to be a function of  $x$  – a situation that is implicitly claimed to be one which no true scientist worth her salt can afford to admit.

To escape the Scylla of a vicious circle, one can always opt for the Charybdis of turning the relation between the individual and the society upside down by arguing it is the latter that helps define the former. Radical societalism, which is but another name for this manoeuvre, will certainly help avoid the sort of circularity that Dittmar lays at Bernstein's door, but perpetuates the very same drawbacks of thoroughbred individualism.

The danger is, to repeat a point already made, when one takes a pendulum swing to the other extreme by claiming that the concept of a social order is a pre-theoretical given and the individual is but a function thereof. By thus reducing the role of the subject of language to that of a mere cog in the wheel, one forecloses the very possibility of asking how it is that the individual can and often does stand up to the overwhelming powers that seek to silence her voice. The case of Sophocles' Antigone springs to mind here. So too does that of Dr. Stockman, that unforgettable character from Ibsen's play. If Antigone and Dr. Stockman strike someone as being too fictive to be true to life, well, one might just as well consider the case of that frail-looking Chinese citizen empty-handedly defying an entire column of tanks in Beijing's Tiananmen square. Far from being exceptions to a rule, these cases point to an ever-present, perhaps irreducible, tension between the private

(including, as in this last case, the right to free opinion) and the public in a person's life.

Now, I am by no means arguing in favour of conflating the two oppositions "cognitive *versus* Social" and "private *versus* Public". The former is usually stated in cut-and-dry terms, whereas the latter, it seems, is best characterised as a polar opposition. But I do want to claim that any serious and in-depth consideration of the former opposition will inevitably lead to a consideration of the latter opposition. This is so because what is at stake is not just the consciousness of the subject of language but, in a far more urgent sense, her *conscientiousness* insofar as she is also an ethical agent. The ethical and the political questions are, in other words, inseparable from the cognitive role of the agent, although the Rationalist tradition of thought has systematically sought to drive a wedge between the two sets of questions.

It so happens, however, that, from Plato onwards, it has been Western philosophy's central concern to find newer and ever newer ways and means to make the private and the public mesh into each other to the point of becoming mutually indistinguishable, with Reason as the ultimate arbiter and guarantor. The one abiding concern of political philosophers since time immemorial has been to ascertain, on the one hand, the limits of the freedom of the individual and, on the other, stipulate how far the State should and should not go in invading the privacy of the individual. The recent sex scandals involving the President of the United States attest to the persistence of the concern in the political life of a nation which, as it happens, is among those most concerned with the individual's right to privacy.

Now, one increasingly fashionable response to the challenge posed by the problem of drawing the line between the individual and the society – the former viewed as a sentient being, fully autonomous and answerable only to herself and the latter thought of as a collectivity which is more than just the sum total of individual interests – is to dismiss the whole issue as a pseudo-problem, by summarily decreeing that there simply is no way of bringing the two together. Such a sweeping, radical solution has been recommended, for instance, by neo-pragmatists, most notably, Richard Rorty (*passim*, but especially, Rorty, 1989). Central to Rorty's stance is the claim that the private and the public are two distinct domains and that any attempt to subsume the two under some overarching category or to explain one in terms of the other is destined to be a fiasco, as the history of centuries of vain philosophising has – in his

view – amply demonstrated. Rorty therefore exhorts us to give up once and for all hope that public matters could be adjudicated by appeal to some non-contingent principles. Once we rid ourselves of all pretensions of classical metaphysics, Rorty thinks, we will be in a position to espouse private irony as a way of coping with our lives.

Now, it has been pointed out that Rorty's insistence on maintaining intact the distinction between the private and the public domains is not to be seen as being of a piece with "the Hellenistic or Harendtian demarcation of *oikos* and *polis*, between the domestic hearth and the public forum" (Critchley, 1996, p.21). The fact remains, nonetheless, that contemporary pragmatism is predicated upon a clear-cut distinction between the two, although it is readily conceded that neither the individual nor the State has any identity over and above what it contingently happens to possess. The greatest merit of pragmatism is perhaps its plain recognition of the fact that ours is an age of crumbling identities. Even outside of the pragmatist camp, there seems to be a growing perception that the time is ripe for re-thinking the very nature of some of the entities that one used to take for granted not very long ago. The list includes "language", (Davidson, 1984; Burke & Porter, 1991) "the (rigorously monolingual) speaker of a language" (Rajagopalan, 1997; forthcoming), "nation", (Bhabha, 1994) and "culture". And, to be sure, theorists of language can ill afford to ignore what is taking place under their very noses, on pain of rendering their reflections mere exercises in wild fancy.

But, because of its reluctance to admit of the possibility that the distinction between the private and the public may turn out to be tension-ridden rather than being one characterised by mutual exclusion, pragmatism is hard put to it to explain the all-too-frequent clashes of interest between the two domains. Rorty, it seems, tends to somewhat complacently sidestep the whole issue by conjuring up a utopian state modelled after "the rich North Atlantic democracies" where he thinks the citizens have learnt to separate public liberalism and private irony. Indeed Rorty is all for private irony, which he says is what we are left with, once we have extricated ourselves from the clutches of academic Philosophy with its tireless quest for first principles on which to ground public morality. As he puts it in his essay "On the priority of democracy to philosophy", instead of looking for such transcendental, ahistorical, Archimedian points of reference outside of one's lived circumstances, one ought to be "putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit" (Rorty, 1991, p.178).

The only trouble with the rosy picture presented by contemporary pragmatism is that it assumes a vast consensus already arrived at by members of a community that has supposedly overcome all sources of potential tension by democratically thrashing out differences of interest. Instead of countenancing a world divided between US and THEM, Rortyan pragmatists recommend that we concentrate on US, hoping that the category so designated will constantly expand as to some day in the remotest future (maybe only in a Utopian world) absorb everyone that gets classified today as part of THEM.

The paradisiac vision of democracy entailed by the pragmatist view is but a rehashing of the old Biblical idea of the lion and the lamb enjoying, as it were, a "heavenly picnic" in the best spirit of celestial camaraderie. But one must admit that it is a far cry from anything one actually comes across, even in the "rich North Atlantic democracies" of which Rorty speaks with such great enthusiasm and approval. Arguably too, the very view of democracy as a form of rule where tensions are gradually replaced by harmony and uniformity of interests is not at all helpful except as a wilful exercise of romantic imagination. In real societies, private and public interests do frequently clash and, as noted earlier, Sophocles' *Antigone* and Ibsen's *Dr. Stockman* (alongside of countless cases from real life) are constant reminders to the often irreconcilable clash of interests between the two domains.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that the pragmatists' idea of democracy is modelled on their idea of language in thinking about which they claim the notion of transparent representation is of little help. If, as they say, language ought not to be seen as acting as a *tertium quid* between the external world and the sentient mind, so too the pragmatists are claiming that a healthy democracy is no longer to be seen as encumbered by the age-old preoccupation with being a means for the individual to partake of the collective decision-making. In both cases, the very idea of representation is to be traded without remorse for some such notion as "self-fashioning" or an ever-expanding sense of "recognition" ( Taylor, 1992).

Ingenious though such moves may well be, what we still fail to account for is the fact that in the world of lived reality, the relations among persons and between these and the society at large is ridden with strife and conflict. It is pointless and perverse to simply wish them away or pretend they did not exist. While the Rortyan pragmatists are right as far as their criticism of transparent representation is concerned,

to propose that we should therefore give up the very idea of representation is to throw the baby of representation along with the bath-water of transparency. The usefulness of language as representation consists precisely in foregrounding the political (and hence, in the ultimate analysis, the ethical) question – for, representation is, over and above everything else, a political question. Even as perfect representation by language of a putatively pre-existent reality turns out, in the final analysis, to be a contradiction in terms, so too its political analogue is at best an ideal state of affairs to be cherished rather than something one should effectively hope to see realised on the face of this earth. But it is precisely because the ensuing tensions cannot be done away with once and for all that there arises the need for a practical ethic. In other words, there will for ever be a role for the ethical subject of language for the simple reason that perfect and stable equilibrium of forces is an unattainable goal insofar as human linguistic practices are concerned. This means that the agent is required to be on the alert all the time, to endlessly re-negotiate the limits of the elbow room within which she may fashion her own self. Furthermore, she is constantly going to be called upon to weigh alternative courses of action, make choices, and take decisions, including some that she may come to regret later on. But then, come to think of it, there is nothing unfamiliar about such demands on her. The ethical agent has always been and will always be a tight rope walker.

What the cognitive and the societal domains of contemporary research in pragmatics urgently call for, then, is an attempt at critical articulation rather than either the search for a wider framework that can comfortably accommodate the two or the attempt to make either domain dependent on the other. A critical articulation will, as I have been suggesting, shift the focus of attention from the cognitive-societal opposition to the opposition between the private and the public domains, with a view to interrogating the role of the subject of language as an ethical agent.

## **Note**

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- *RESUMO: É possível reconciliar o lado cognitivo e o lado social da significação pragmática? Ou, será que os dois estão condenados a permanecerem num estado permanente de conflito mútuo? Procuro sustentar neste trabalho que as versões radicais de ambas as teses, opostas entre si, pecam pelo seguinte motivo: querer captar tudo o que acontece no plano da pragmática num punhado de regras determinísticas. Argumento, em seguida, que é preciso encarar o sujeito de linguagem tanto como um agente consciencioso quanto uma pessoa consciente. Em outras palavras, a questão ética necessariamente se faz presente neste embate entre o social e o cognitivo.*
- *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Significação pragmática; cognitivismo; aspecto social; questão ética.*

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