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War and 'dediscoursation': a research frame

A Linguist's Response
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War and 'De-discoursation': a research frame – A Linguist's Response

Introduction

This report has been prepared as a response to Drazen Pehar's paper "War and De-discoursation: a research frame". In his paper, Pehar aims to present an explanatory theory of the process of communication breakdown in conflict situations. This theory, which he calls "de-discoursation", aims to address the times when dialogue and discourse are abandoned by the negotiating parties and the situation deteriorates into military conflict or war. The paper gives examples of historic situations where dialogue has broken down, and suggests this is because the behaviour of one party makes the other party believe that "further use of discourse would not pay off" (p4). This belief is based on the perception that some "fundamental conditions of agreeability are not satisfied" (p4). Pehar then goes on to describe the "moral matrix of language use" (p7), whereby people make moral judgements about others based on their use of language, which ultimately lead to losing faith in the discourse process.

Pehar presents an interesting theory about discourse from a peace and conflict studies perspective, but without detailed discourse analysis from a linguistic perspective. His ideas about de-discoursation echo Grice's ideas about co-operation in conversation (Grice, 1975), but without making any reference to them. His discussion about discourse and language in use would benefit from a firm grounding in linguistic theory, and the Co-operative Principle (Grice, 1975: 45) is particularly relevant, as well as Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia" as discussed by Lemke (1995: 39-57). This response will show how these linguistic theories could shed further insight into Pehar's notion of de-discoursation. It will also re-examine his treatment of linguistic relativism (Pehar p10) and the influence of language on culture and vice versa (p13 and 14).

The co-operative principle and conversational implicature

Grice's theories about conversation follow from the observation that, at times, language in use seems to imply much more than what is actually said, more than can be understood from conventional implicature. An example of conventional implicature would be a statement such as "students are poor and Marco is a student", leading to the implication that Marco is poor. Grice calls non-conventional implications "conversational implicatures" (1975: 45) and maintains that it is possible for them to arise because speakers and listeners observe certain "conditions governing conversation" (Grice, 1975: 43) rather than following principles of logic. These conditions amount to the so-called "Co-operative Principle" or CP, meaning fundamentally that two people involved in a conversation will co-operate within that conversation such that they will make an appropriate contribution at the appropriate time (Grice, 1975: 45). Pehar appears to mean something similar to this when he talks about "fundamental conditions of agreeability".

Grice goes on to offer four maxims which expand on the Co-operative Principle. Firstly, the maxim of quantity requires a speaker to say enough but not too much. The maxim of quality essentially amounts to telling the truth, but specifically is "do not say what you believe to be false or that for which you lack evidence". The maxim of relation requires the speaker's con-

tribution to be relevant. Finally, the maxim of manner is to "be perspicuous", not obscure, not ambiguous, but brief and orderly (Grice, 1975: 45-46). Failure to co-operate in conversation could be as a result of breaking any one of these maxims. The communication breakdowns identified by Pehar and used to build his "moral matrix of language use" (Pehar p7) could also be ascribed to a failure to observe Grice's maxims. So Hitler could be said to break the maxim of quality (Pehar p3), as the Spartans accuse the Athenians, and Milosevic accuses the authors of the Rambouillet agreement of the same (Pehar p6). In the 'Israeli-Arab' case, Pehar's explanation suggests that the maxim of manner has been broken, in this case by the UN because of the ambiguity of the UN resolution (Pehar p8). The maxims offer an alternative explanation to Pehar's moral matrix of language use and its four functions of "truth, meaning, reason-giving and promising" (Pehar p10).

Pehar observes that "de-discoursing behaviour" does not always lead to the parties abandoning dialogue straightaway (Pehar p6). He also suggests that, at times, people are willing to enter into dialogue when they are aware of de-discoursing behaviour from the start (Pehar p3). However, the theory overall does not seem to give a good account of why this might be the case. The Co-operative Principle might offer an interesting perspective in this case. Grice comments that the CP is not so much an explanation of what happens in conversation, more an observation that this is how people do behave (Grice, 1975: 48). In seeking for a rational underpinning of the CP, he suggests that people co-operate because it is the only rational thing to do, it only makes sense to engage in conversation with someone on the assumption that this exchange will be co-operative, that is, "conducted in general accordance with the CP and the maxims" (Grice, 1975: 49). In other words, engaging in dialogue starts with the assumption that the participants will co-operate. This may account for participants' willingness to engage in dialogue even in situations of conflict, including what Pehar describes as one party's "ambiguous attitude" towards the party engaged in "de-discoursing behaviour" (p10).

This assumption of co-operation continues even when maxims appear to have been broken, the hearer will seek to interpret the speaker as if he or she is being co-operative (Birner, 2013: 42). Grice sets out a different ways in which a speaker may fail to keep the maxims (1975: 49). A speaker may deliberately violate a maxim without the listener knowing. This will usually mislead the listener, for example a lie violates the maxim of quality, and failing to give adequate information violates the maxim of quantity. A speaker may simply opt out of the maxims and not co-operate at all. Or a speaker may flout a maxim in such blatant way that it is obvious the maxim has not been fulfilled. In this case, the assumption of co-operation comes into play. In the face of a blatant flouting, a listener will try to reconcile what has been said with the assumption of co-operation, and in this way conversational implicatures are drawn. One of Grice's examples makes this clear: x may say "Smith doesn't seem to have a girlfriend these days" to which y responds "He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately". If x is to assume that y is being co-operative whilst appearing to flout the maxim of relevance, this leads to the implicature that Smith has a girlfriend in New York (1975: 51). Exploring the ways in which one participant in dialogue flouts, violates or opts out of the maxims, and how the other participant may try to reconcile apparent violations before accepting that communication is no longer co-operative may help Pehar to give account of why and when de-discoursing behaviour does or does not lead to a breakdown in communication.

Heteroglossia and linguistic relativity

Violating or flouting maxims could be what Pehar calls de-discoursing behaviour. This kind of speech act would be carried out deliberately. Unnoticed violations would be a deliberate failure to co-operate or attempt to deceive, while the intention would be to make some kind of implicature in the case of blatant flouting. Throughout Pehar's paper, it is difficult to ascertain whether he thinks that de-disoursing behaviour is done deliberately or not, although the party which is acted upon must perceive it as deliberate, in order to construe a conversation implicature or decide communication is no longer co-operative. However, communication breakdown often occurs because of misunderstandings between the two parties. Pehar alludes to the fact that misunderstandings sometimes occur via the process of interpretation (Pehar, p19). But the opportunity for misunderstanding runs deeper than a problem of interpretation, as the parties approach the negotiations from a different culture and speaking with a different "social voice" (Lemke, 1995: 24).

Each party comes to the negotiating table with its own view of the problem and with the background context of its own community or society. Each will speak of the matter from its own perspective, and construct its own discourse (Lemke, 1995: 37). In a sense, people are using the same words, but not talking about the same thing, or at least, not talking about it in the same way. This diversity of social languages is what Bakhtin means by "heteroglossia" (Lemke, 1995: 38). Pehar gives a sense that this is what is going on when he describes the conflict between Sparta and Athens. Each claims that acts the other describes as defensive are actually acts of aggression (Pehar, p3). The same process seems to be at work in Pehar's examples of Milosevic and Nasser – their construal of the discourse is at variance with the other parties in the negotiation. Discourse analysis could deconstruct the world views and orientational stance of the parties and the relationship between them, to understand the reasons for the failure of dialogue.

Pehar, however, appears to reject the idea that meaning is subjective and shaped by an individual or a society's shared experience and culture (Pehar, p10-11) whilst at the same time maintaining that cultural factors influence de-discoursing behaviour in communication (Pehar, p14). However, to say that meaning is subjective is not the same point of view as Lewis Caroll's Humpty Dumpty, who asserts that when he uses a word "it means just what I choose it to mean". Clearly, there is agreement about what words mean. However, the categories and concepts expresses in a language are not based on categories that exist in the real world, but are constructs of the language. Meanings are not cognitively represented like dictionary definitions, but are based on "prototypes", with "fuzzy boundaries" and typical and atypical members (Lakoff, 1990: 56). These meaning representations include information about the relationship between other members within the prototype, as well as about the way the word relates to the world, and an individual's own experience. Lakoff calls these representations "idealized cognitive models" (1990: 68).

Chilton takes up this view when he says that "the meanings of words, of sentences and of discourses are in the mind, not objectively given" (2004: 48). Language is not a neutral device through which we access the world as it really is, but instead, language carries its own values and interpretation, which always affects the way the world is understood and experienced. Thus, "when Derrida claims there is nothing outside the text, he means there is no

reality that is not always already interpreted through the mediating lens of language" (Smith, 2006: 39). The discourse of a community shapes its own belief as well as its understanding of the discourse of another community. This will influence how the parties relate to one another, and therefore, will influence the success or otherwise of negotiation designed to bring about a peace which both sides can adhere to.

Pehar does recognise the way discourse shapes society in his discussion about the way what he calls 'culture' is transmitted through narratives (Pehar, p13-14). He also suggests that these narratives will be brought to the negotiating table and may influence the outcome of talks. But he does talk of a society as if it consisted of only one 'culture', and suggests that some cultures glorify violence (Pehar, p13). In the examples that he has chosen, there is, however, the possibility that violence is part of the dominant discourse in a society, with little opportunity for dissenting voices or identities to be expressed. Chomsky suggests that even the possibility of a dissenting discourse may not be apparent to those who are being dominated, as the parameters of debate are constrained by those in control of the discourse (Chomsky, 2003: 13). So those who are actually negotiating may not be truly representative of society, but rather representative of the hegemonic class, to take Gramsci's term, and it may be fairer to speak of the attitudes of the dominant culture towards violence rather than the society as a whole. In fact, it is quite likely that violence is part of the discourse and substance of justifying and maintaining power and domination. Discourse analysis would again be useful way of deconstructing the way language is used to build or resist power and identity.

Conclusion

Pehar's theory that de-discoursation happens when certain behaviour has taken place that makes discourse unlikely to be profitable seems right. However, his analysis of what that behaviour could be developed if it included some linguistic analysis. Pehar's ideas about "conditions of agreeability" and his "moral matrix of language use" are similar to Grice's notions of the conditions of conversation (the Co-operative Principle) and his maxims. This suggests that it would be useful to bring these theories to bear on the theory of "de-discoursation". Further analysis should also include an understanding of how discourse and language construct people's understanding of reality, and the establishment of their identity, leading to heteroglossia and the potential for talk to reinforce conflict rather than bring peace. A more nuanced approach to how language and discourse construct meaning and reinforce or resist power relations and cultural hegemony could also provide a richer theoretical backdrop. A critical discourse analysis could provide material to tell us more about the process of de-discoursation and lead on from the simple and rather eclectic presentation of examples used to introduce the concept here.

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