



The Problem of Linguistic Theory in Relation to Language Behavior: A Tribute and Reply to Paul Goodman

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The Problem of Linguistic Theory in Relation to Language Behavior: A Tribute and Reply to Paul Goodman

LINGUISTIC SCIENCE coexists uneasily with the facts of human verbal behavior. Most theoretical linguists have a tendency to abstract away from the way people talk to an idealized conception of what it is to talk. Thus they fail to take into account a great deal of what people in fact say and how they say it, and at the same time insist on considering many things that no one has ever said or is ever likely to say. Every once in a while someone comes along to castigate those linguists on this curious relation of their work to actual speech behavior. One of the most recent spokesmen for the individual language user is the late Paul Goodman. With characteristic bluntness, he wrote, in *Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry*:¹

Again and again I find myself dissenting from the main line of the scientific linguists of the past fifty years—the anthropologists, the positivists, and the structuralists. (The authors I mean are [Edward] Sapir, [Benjamin Lee] Whorf, [Ferdinand de] Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, Louis Hjelmslev, Zellig Harris, [Roman] Jakobson, [Noam] Chomsky, [Lev] Vygotsky.) It seems to me that in abstracting language from speaking and hearing in actual situations, they make three fundamental, and connected mistakes: (1) They exaggerate constancy and supra-individuality as against the variability and interpersonality of natural language; the “language” that they discuss, with its constant forms and self-contained rules, is sometimes an artifact of their method of investigation. (2) They say that the forms of language can rarely, if ever, be explained by meanings in experience and practical use, and the forms themselves do not have meaning. (3) They have a disposition to treat language and communication as a calculus of forms and a processing of information that could dispense with human speakers and hearers altogether.

Goodman was careful to point out that he did not think that the results of such theorizing have been totally worthless: on Hjelmslev’s dictum that “[t]he linguistic theoretician . . . sets up a general calculus in which all conceivable cases are foreseen,” he commented: “Incidentally, I have a lot of respect for this kind of musico-mathematical enterprise. It is often beautiful in itself, and it sometimes does cast light on real things.”² Rather, Goodman argued, it would be better to do linguistic analysis like art or literary

criticism, in a "reasoned but *a posteriori*" manner, not like mathematics. In this way, linguistics would not operate merely on the made-up samples of human speech that it characteristically analyzes; instead it would have to come to grips with "the most intimate speech, the most convivial speech, the most expressive speech, the most poetic speech,"³ most of which linguistic science currently labels deviant.

Goodman pointed out that much of what he had to say about the nature of language and its use was said forty years ago or more by such anthropologists as Edward Burnett Tyler, Franz Boas, and most pointedly, Bronislaw Malinowski.⁴ It is interesting to speculate why Malinowski's view that the proper study of language is the study of speech events in their original "contexts of situation"⁵ never caught on at all in anthropology and only marginally in linguistics. Its failure to be adopted cannot have been due to its having been out of step with the prevailing theoretical goals of the social sciences of the times, since his approach was rigidly behavioristic and behaviorism was then in the ascendant. The reason, I believe, is that Malinowski's techniques could not be applied in any thoroughgoing way by other anthropologists and linguists, because training in those techniques was simply not available to graduate students. Although, in linguistics, Malinowski's banner was indeed taken up by the British linguist John Rupert Firth, he never did more than argue abstractly for the concept of studying language use in context; he never took it upon himself to show anyone how to do so effectively.⁶

In the past few years, however, the situation has changed. First of all, structural linguistics is a very different discipline now from what it was ten years ago, not to mention forty years ago. The dominant figure in linguistics today, as everyone acknowledges, is Noam Chomsky, and while Chomsky's name is properly listed by Goodman as one who may be accused of "abstracting language from speaking and hearing in actual situations," he must also be credited with having greatly enriched our collective conception of what it is to be human beings, for only human beings possess the wonderfully intricate system of rules that underlies language. Second, there has now grown up around pure linguistic science a host of cross-disciplinary approaches to language that study it in relation to human development, to human anatomy and physiology (notably that of the ears, nose, throat, mouth, and brain); and to social structures, conventions, and institutions. Recently, that is, just those sorts of things Goodman was interested in seeing studied are, in fact, being studied, but in conjunction with and in relation to the abstract study of language, not in place of it.

One way of looking at these contemporary developments is to examine how scholars today analyze an individual's *verbal ability*. They distinguish three separate components; first, the ability to understand speech and to listen, the faculty for speech *perception*; second, the ability to talk, the faculty for speech *production*; and third, the ability to judge what count as

samples of a given language in a laboratory setting, the faculty for speech *prediction*. The first two components of verbal ability, perception and production, relate primarily to language in actual use. The third component, which is partially independent of the other two, accounts for each individual's ability to deal with his native language (or languages) as an autonomous system (or systems); it is this component, in other words, which corresponds to Chomsky's notion of an internalized grammar. This grammar must be assumed to exist in order to account for a person's ability to predict whether something not previously encountered belongs to his language. It is now generally recognized, however, that the processes of ordinary speaking and listening go on essentially independently of this internalized grammar. Speaking does not require a mental construction of what one says by means of one's grammar, nor does listening require a mental reconstruction of what one hears. In the latter case, we can now point to the existence of gestalt-like rules by which a person maps what he hears directly onto an image indicating what he thinks that acoustical event means.⁷

With this division of verbal ability in mind, it should come as no surprise to find that some things which people spontaneously say and understand will, when taken out of context, be judged by the same people as not part of their language. Similarly, it should not be surprising to learn that they will judge as part of their language some things which are never spontaneously said and which would be difficult or impossible to understand. In other words, the tension that we noted at the beginning of this essay between linguistic science and the facts of language use exists within each individual.

Before illustrating these points with examples, let me introduce a further terminological distinction. We say that an expression is *acceptable* if it may be used spontaneously in a given context, and that it is *grammatical* if it may be judged, independent of context, to be part of the language. It is easy to construct examples of sentences that are grammatical but unacceptable in any context. Consider, for example, one way in which we modify a noun in English, namely by adding a clause after the noun in which the noun is understood as the direct object. Thus, if we have a sentence which is both acceptable in some contexts and grammatical, such as "The tiger died," we can form a new sentence, also acceptable and grammatical, "The tiger the elephant gored died." The clause "the elephant gored" modifies the noun "tiger"; "tiger," moreover, is understood as the direct object of the verb "gored." Grammatically, the noun "elephant" in the latter sentence can in turn be modified in exactly the same way, but if it is, the resulting sentence is likely to be unacceptable in all contexts: "The tiger the elephant the fly bit gored died." Such a sentence may *seem* ungrammatical, but in fact it is not, as anyone can readily convince himself, once he understands the underlying mechanism for constructing such sentences. Conversely,

many ungrammatical sentences are acceptable in certain contexts, and their deviance from full grammaticality may go completely unnoticed. Literature abounds with examples. Rebecca West has been cited for the following striking example: "A copy of the universe is not what is required of art; one of the damned thing is ample."⁸ The first paragraph of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, which consists entirely of sentence fragments, is an even more spectacular case of this sort.

Confusion about acceptability and grammaticality has led some people, Goodman included, to wonder whether grammaticality judgments are reliable, or even possible. Goodman's statement of his skepticism is quite typical: "If I am asked if a sentence is grammatical or idiomatic, I often find it quite impossible to answer without considerable speculation about its meaning in possible contexts. My immediate spontaneous judgment of an isolated sentence is not reliable."⁹ It is quite right to say that grammaticality judgments, except in the very simplest cases, cannot be rendered spontaneously, but speculating about the appropriateness of expressions to possible contexts is not the way to obtain correct judgments of grammaticality. At most such speculations can lead only to judgments of potential acceptability. Judgments of grammaticality can be rendered, in complex cases, only under controlled conditions, in which comparisons with other examples and perhaps conscious reflection on grammatical processes are undertaken.

Goodman was confused about meaning as well as grammaticality. In this case, too, the contemporary view concerning the partitioning of verbal ability is helpful. When considered in isolation, linguistic expressions can be seen to have meaning solely by virtue of their form: the words that appear in them and their internal syntactic organization. This we may call the *conventional meaning* of those expressions. There is also, however, meaning by virtue of context, specifically the context of interpersonal communication that interested Goodman so much. Paul Grice, who has done significant study on this aspect of meaning, labels it *conversational meaning* (following an older tradition, this would be one aspect of pragmatics). To illustrate the distinction between conventional and conversational meaning, we may consider the question, "Will you be busy tonight?" and its answer, "No." Conventionally, the question asks for information, whether the hearer will be occupied later that day. The answer indicates, conventionally, that the hearer will not be occupied. Conversationally, however, the questioner may be indicating that he is about to extend an invitation to the hearer, and the hearer may be indicating that he would be receptive to that as yet unspoken invitation.

The systematic study of conventional meaning has of course been pursued for a long time within both linguistics and philosophy; the systematic study of conversational meaning is of more recent vintage. Broadly speaking, two major lines of investigation have been developed to deal with conversational meaning. The followers of what might be called the *func-*

tional approach (associated with the philosophers John Austin, John Searle and Paul Grice) have examined speech in given situations and tried to identify its specific functions and to create axioms which define the nature of the acts it performs. The followers of the *structural* approach (associated with the sociologists Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and others) attempt, on the other hand, to relate the structural relations within and among utterances to specific aspects of the situations in which the conversations take place. Functionalists hold that the conversational meaning of an expression may be deduced from an examination of its conventional meaning plus the application of axioms based on *a priori* functional considerations. Thus a conversational axiom might be: "If, conventionally, a person appears to be contributing nothing new to the conversation (by uttering a logical truth), then, conversationally, he must be saying something different." Structuralists relate what is said more directly to the situation at hand; they analyze conversational meaning by referring to the structure of the interpersonal situation as well as to the structure of the verbal material itself. It is important to note that the two groups unite in their belief that something systematic can be said about conversational meaning, whereas earlier, such philosophers as Charles Morris and Rudolf Carnap thought that whatever was pragmatic was necessarily idiosyncratic. They do, however, tend to focus on different aspects of conversational meaning: the functionalists on substantive aspects such as what was actually said; the structuralists on formal aspects such as how closure and turn-taking are determined.

The basic problem with the functionalist approach is that one cannot create a reasonably delimited list of workable axioms without first sharply limiting the kinds of interactions to be accounted for. Thus, functionalists have not been able to deal with conversational meaning that is at any great remove from conventional meaning. To deal with more complex conversational meanings, something along the lines of Goodman's "reasoned but *a posteriori*" approach is still necessary.

The structuralists, however, by paying close attention to interactional and verbal detail, and then manipulating their observations in the manner of a grammarian manipulating syntax, may be able to discover when certain fairly subtle conversational rules of interpretation operate. Consider, for example, the verbal exchange we used earlier:

A. Will you be busy tonight?

B. No.

Remember that we contend that if *A* and *B* are friends, then *A*'s question may be interpreted conversationally as an expression of desire to extend an invitation to *B* and *B*'s response can be seen as an indication of his receptiveness.

Let us make some further observations. First, note that the conversation is naturally continued by *A*'s actually extending the invitation and by *B*'s accepting or modifying it to suit his desires:

A. Then how about I pick you up at 8:00 to go bowling?

B. O.K. But let's make it for 8:30 instead.

It would be unnatural for *B* to turn *A* down flatly at this point. If he really wasn't going to be busy but wanted to be left alone, he would probably have said so or made up a story about being busy in reply to *A*'s first question. Second, note that *B* can anticipate *A*'s invitation by asking, in reply to *A*'s first question, what *A* has in mind, or by stating that he is open to suggestions. These kinds of replies would only be intelligible if, in fact, *B* thought that *A* had an invitation up his sleeve. Third, *A*'s initial question can be varied syntactically, without making any significant change in its conversational meaning as long as its conventional meaning inquires about what *B* will or will not be doing that evening. For example, *A* could ask, among other things, "Are you busy tonight?" "Are you doing anything tonight?" "What are you going to be doing tonight?" or "Will you be free this evening?" Fourth, the conversational meaning we have been describing vanishes as soon as we alter the social roles of *A* and *B* in certain ways. For example, if *A* is the person who precedes *B* on a work shift, and he asks *B* "Will you be busy tonight?" as he is going off duty, then that question will be interpreted as a literal inquiry as to whether much will be going on that evening. *A* may be intending to ask *B* to do him a favor, but *B*, unless he is wary, or *A* is a known asker of favors, would have no reason to anticipate such a request.

All of this suggests the existence of a conversational rule. Put in the form of a conversational axiom, the rule is that if a person asks a friend about what that friend is doing during a stretch of time in the near future, then he is asking the friend to make that time available for friendly joint pursuits.¹⁰

In the foregoing account of the conversational meaning of a particular kind of verbal exchange, I used the structuralist's method, but ended with a functionalist's statement. This is because I believe that this particular blend of the two approaches to conversational meaning yields the most significant and interesting results.¹¹ The functionalists provide the better overall theoretical framework, and the structuralists the better working method. But, however conversational meaning is gotten at, it is clear that it exists side by side with conventional meaning, just as we saw earlier that acceptability coexists with grammaticality. One pair (acceptability and conversational meaning) is needed for dealing with how language is used; the other (grammaticality and conventional meaning) for dealing with how it is structured.

REFERENCES

1. Paul Goodman, *Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 86-87.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
5. This is the phrase Malinowski used in *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, II, the work that provides the most complete account of his mature thinking about language (New York: American Book Company, 1935).
6. For detailed discussion of Malinowski's theory of language, and Firth's development of it, see D. Terence Langendoen, *The London School of Linguistics* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968).
7. For examples, see Thomas G. Bever, "The Cognitive Basis of Linguistic Structures," *Cognition and the Development of Language*, ed. John Hayes (New York: Wiley, 1970).
8. Noam Chomsky, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), pp. 32-33.
9. Goodman, *Speaking and Language*, p. 90.
10. In case the friends are particularly close, so that *A* may in fact presume upon *B*'s time for a favor (such as baby-sitting), the purpose for which *A* is asking *B* to make time available may be different. To handle this, we may generalize the conversational rule by deleting the phrase "for friendly joint pursuits"; what use *A* wishes to make of *B*'s time will then be based on the strength of their friendship.
11. For an outstanding structuralist-functionalist account of "sounding" among New York City black adolescents, see William Labov, "Rules for Ritual Insult," *Studies in Social Interaction*, ed. David Sudnow (New York: Free Press, 1972).