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Meaning potential in conversation

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9. MEANING POTENTIAL IN CONVERSATION

9.1 Discourse Grammar

The functioning of semantic indeterminacy can be adequately explained on the basis of the **semantics-pragmatics interface**. Halliday argues that although the text is a semantic unit it is realized in patterns which mean grammar. Grammar cannot be avoided in discourse analysis. "...a discourse grammar needs to be functional and semantic in its orientation, with the grammatical categories explained as the realization of semantic patterns" (1994.xvii). Leech (1983.5) compares grammar, i.e. the abstract formal system of language, and pragmatics: "In general, grammar is describable in terms of discrete and determinate categories; pragmatics is describable in terms of continuous and indeterminate values".

My attempt at a systematic analysis of pragmatic values related to the concept of semantic indeterminacy is based on features which cannot be clearly defined and expressed by means of discrete categories and discrete units. This view is supported by Mey (1994.3261-3278): "The problems of pragmatics are not confined to the semantic, the syntactic, or the phonological fields, exclusively. Pragmatics thus defines a cluster of related problems, rather than a strictly delimited area of research".

My aim is to cover the patterns of semantic indeterminacy belonging to the polarity framework **determinate versus indeterminate**. There are, however, no clear-cut categories of meaning which can be applied in discourse analysis. Semantic indeterminacy is **context-bound**, utilizing features of all language levels in cooperation. Indirectness, impersonality, attenuation and accentuation accompanied by vagueness appear in clusters and clines which are frequently indiscrete. My apprehension of the fuzzy nature of the phenomena under discussion is supported by Wittgenstein: "But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all..." (1958.11).

9.2 Degree of Indirectness: Comparing Genres

Patterns of semantic indeterminacy encountered in informal conversation (indirectness, impersonality, attenuation and accentuation, accompanied by vagueness) are studied in three different conversation genres: face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation and radio interviews. My objective is to draw a comparison between these genres and study the similarities and differences in the manifestations of semantic indeterminacy they display.

My research concerning the **variability of the degree of indirectness** in authentic conversation has verified my hypothesis that manifestations of semantic indeterminacy are present in all conversation genres. The degree of indeterminacy, however, differs considerably from genre to genre. Even within the same genre, especially due to the formality versus informality scale, marked differences appear in the configuration of the degrees of indirectness.

More importantly, it has been proved that it is possible to find a unifying theoretical foundation and justification for the evaluation of all the related phenomena constituting semantic indeterminacy. Semantic indeterminacy is a phenomenon which is an integral part of the language system. It enhances the meaning potential of language and triggers shifts in the word and utterance meaning.

9.3 Semantic Indeterminacy and Modality

Semantic indeterminacy incorporates **modality**. Modality is understood as **deixis**, resulting from the **comparison of the expressed world (the subjective expression of the reality) and the real world** (realis vs. irrealis). Expressing a subjective opinion is the basic aspect of modality, in harmony with Palmer (1986.16) “Modality in language is, then, concerned with subjective characteristics of an utterance, and it could even be further argued that subjectivity is an essential criterion of modality. Modality could, that is to say, be defined as the grammaticalization of speaker’s (subjective) attitudes and opinions”.

Semantic indeterminacy contributes largely to the interpretation of the extra-linguistic reality which is based on **belief rather than knowledge**. The truth-conditioned interpretation of the sentence meaning is abandoned, because it cannot adequately explain the process of human communication.

Semantic indeterminacy is desirable, although it is “costly and risky” (Dascal 1983). In this connection, Wittgenstein’s observation is worthy of mention: “The sense of a sentence—one would like to say—may, of course, leave this or that open, but the sentence must nevertheless have a definite sense. An indefinite sense—that would really not be a sense at all” (1958.45).

The social dimension of human communication, i.e. social mutuality, carried out through the negotiation of subjective meaning(s) in the interaction process places requirements on the relative openness and tentativeness of the speaker’s meaning which allows for **confirmation or clarification**. In short, the presence of semantic indeterminacy in conversation is most acceptable and appropriate.