Expression and Communication
as Basic Linguistic Functions

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Communication as a Function of Language

Much modern linguistic theory is based on the assumption that the primary and fundamental function of language is communication. This is the assumption which is apparent in definitions of language given in linguistic handbooks. For example, in the popular introductory linguistic textbook by Fromkin and Rodman, human language is contrasted to animal commun-ication. The assumption is that an adequate definition of language is one which distinguishes natural human language from other systems of communication. It is taken for granted that the primary nature of human language is as a system of communication.

Of course, there are good reasons for this assumption. Language is a social phenomenon. It is a shared system of codified values. Speakers are able to communicate by virtue of their participation in this system of values, i.e., by virtue of being able to recognize and interpret the values or meanings of words in a given code. The code also includes rules for the combination of words, i.e., syntax. In definitions of language which contrast human language to animal communication, syntax is usually taken to be the defining feature of the linguistic code which distinguishes natural human language from forms of animal communication. This is the position advocated by Noam Chomsky. The syntax of human language is taken to be the creative aspect of the linguistic code which is not present in other forms of communication.

Communication in general is a broader concept which may not involve human beings or words. Communication in the sense of human language may loosely be defined as the ability of one human being to get his thought across to another by verbal means. Whether communication has taken place may be tested behaviorally by having the second person, who has understood the thought which has been verbally communicated by the first person, then in his turn communicate the same thought or message to another person. The study of human communication would thus focus on the question of the conditions which make this process possible or constrain it, e.g., the conditions which may prevent the second person from fully understanding the message, and therefore from being able to communicate it to somebody else.

Language Form and Language Use

Besides the social dimension in language, there is also the individual dimension. Without the individual's participation in the linguistic code, there would be no language. These two dimensions are often known as the dimensions of language form and language use. This distinction is present, for example, in Saussure's definition of *langue* vs. *parole* [1] and in Chomsky's definition of form vs. use, competence vs. performance. This is the difference between the code or shared system of values and the individual's participation. The tradition of linguistic theory which harkens to Saussure and Chomsky concentrates on the study of linguistic form. In this conception of linguistic theory the conditions or constraints on communication mentioned above would belong to the domain of language use, i.e., the individual dimension, and would therefore lie outside the domain of linguistic theory proper. In this conception, it is the goal of linguistic theory to account for the nature of the linguistic code.

The model of language assumed by the conception of linguistic theory which concentrates on the nature of the linguistic code is one which discounts the study of communication itself, and the presence of factors such as comprehension or understanding (and misunderstanding) and interpretation (and misinterpretation) in the process of communication. This approach excludes the individual dimension as irrelevant to the investigation of the linguistic code. For example, in *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* Chomsky proposes the postulate that linguistic theory models the competence of "an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by [...] grammatically irrelevant conditions." [2] Such a model of linguistic theory assumes that perfect communication is already taking place, and that therefore the linguist need not study the process of communication itself; that general linguistic theory is concerned with language form, not language use. Chomsky's idealization of the model of language as one that discounts the individual also enables him to put forth the postulate of linguistic creativity in purely formal terms. Linguistic creativity in Chomsky's conception is the presence of the feature of syntax in

the linguistic code, which enables human beings, as distinct from animals, to produce an infinite number of sentences and therefore communicate an infinite number of messages. This conception, however, discounts the creative role of the individual in the process of communication, beyond the purely formal function of producing a sentence according to the rules of syntax.

Social Variation

Of course, perfect communication is blatantly not the case in the use of language in society. Apart from the factors of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, individuals also come to each situation which involves an act of communication with their own linguistic baggage. Each individual's total sum of linguistic experience is different, which adds up to often considerable differences in idiolect between individuals. Factors like different levels of education, differences in dialect, different interests, abilities and areas of specialization, and the presence or absence of bilingualism or multilingualism considerably affect each individual's idiolect, i.e., their individual linguistic competence as real life people, as distinct from Chomsky's idealized "speaker/listener." Linguists of different persuasion than Chomsky have challenged his view of language on this basis. Real life language shows considerable social variation, as argued for example by William Labov. The Prague School conception of language as a "system of systems" also admitted the existence of stylistic, dialectal and social variation in language, as opposed to Ferdinand Saussure's conception of *la langue* as a more homogeneous linguistic system. However, both these approaches in linguistic theory, i.e., the approach that discounts the individual dimension and the approach that admits social variation, hold in common the tenet that communication is the primary function of language.

Expression as a Function of Language

I would like to argue that there are two basic linguistic functions: besides the function of communication, there is also the function of expression. While these are both universal and complementary to each other, expression is more fundamental. A thought has to be expressed verbally before it can be verbally communicated. Therefore, expression is a prerequisite to communication. Expression is the individual act that precedes the social act of communication. We should not only admit the consideration of the individual dimension of language into linguistic theory, but also recognize the fact that expression is a fundamental fact of individual language use. While the relationship between individuals in society is the dimension of communication, the relationship between language and thought in the individual's linguistic act (or "speech act") is the dimension of expression.

Let us consider this individual dimension from the point of view of expression. The label "speaker/listener" is oriented toward the social dimension and conceals the relationship between language and thought which takes place in the act of the individual's utterance. In the act of speech, the encoding of the thought is often spontaneous: no sooner does the thought come to mind, than the speaker utters it, giving it verbal form. But even in the act of speech, this apparent spontaneity can be deceptive. As the difficulty of communication increases, i.e., if there is anticipation of misunderstanding or misinterpretation, speakers are known to "choose their words carefully." The techniques of good interpersonal communication, such as stating a problem in terms of one's own feelings rather than in terms of accusations against another person, recognizes the fact of the importance of good expression as a prerequisite to good communication. Thus, beside the label "speaker/listener", we might think of new labels, such as "encoder/decoder", or "expressor/understander."

The dimension of expression becomes more evident if we take into account the writing process as a fundamental domain of language use, in addition to speaking. Though "write as you speak" is a common technique for good writing, writing is not merely a recording of speech. If it were, there would be no "writer's block." Why is much study devoted to "writer's block," but not to "speaker's block?" Presumably because of the apparent spontaneity of speech, as opposed to the non-spontaneity of writing. Writing focuses on the process of expression as the conscious composition of text. Thus, in addition to being the "speaker/listener," the individual is the "writer/reader." Writing has the nature of a monologue, detached from the dialogic nature of speech. Writing confronts the individual with the words of his own utterance before it is communicated to another individual; there is a time lapse between the act of expression and the act of communication. Writing presupposes an audience rather than an interlocutor. The process of the reception of writing is passive in the sense that the act of response is removed in time from the act of reception. In fact, the act of response is optional: we reply to personal letters and business correspondence, but ordinarily we do not reply directly to newspaper articles or books read for leisure, though we may discuss them with friends.

The act of individual expression can either be common, as are the everyday utterances of social interaction (e.g., "Hello, how are you today? It's a nice day, isn't it?"), or unique, as is the creation of a great literary or philosophical text, or the entire spectrum in between. A unique verbal expression bears the stamp of authorship. However, short expressions which have been authored may become integrated into everyday language or "lexicalized," thus becoming again a "common" property for expression. For example, the expression "a sea change," meaning a "marked transformation into something better," or "a qualitative change," originated in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*   (Act I, Scene II, lines 396-401):

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> Full fathom five thy father lies;
>   Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes:
>   Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.

Idiomatic expressions, such as "kick the bucket," are also bits of text, the authorship of which has been lost, and which have become integrated into everyday language with a lexicalized meaning (in this case, "to die"). Thus, expression is the domain of linguistic creativity. Expression is a dynamic process which not only uses, but also creates meaning, by putting thought into verbal form.

The act of expression underlies both the encoding of an utterance in speech and the creation of a text in writing. Human culture is full of significant texts. While in speech, the choice of wording is flexible, in a text the exact wording of the text matters. A text has confronted the author with its significance, and continues to confront society with the significance of its words. Culturally significant texts bear an interesting relationship to speech because they are often meant to be recited. For example, the authorship of the Lord's Prayer is allegedly the words of Jesus Christ himself (Matthew 6:9-15, King James Version):

> After this manner therefore pray ye:
> Our Father which art in heaven,
> Hallowed be thy name.
> Thy kingdom come.
> Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.
> Give us this day our daily bread.
> And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
> And lead us not into temptation,
>   but deliver us from evil:
> For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
>   and the glory, for ever. Amen.
> For if ye forgive men their tresspasses,
>   your heavenly Father will also forgive you:
> But if ye forgive not men their tresspasses,
>   neither will your Father forgive your tresspasses.

It is interesting that the exact wording, as the prayer is usually recited in English, is "debts" or "tresspasses," rather than "sins," which is the intended meaning, and which is

the wording given in the passage in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 11:2-4, King James Version):

> And he said unto them, When ye pray, say,
> Our Father which art in heaven,
> Hallowed be thy name.
> Thy kingdom come.
> Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.
> Give us day by day our daily bread.
> And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive
>   everyone that is indebted to us.
> And lead us not into temptation,
>   but deliver us from evil.

Thus social tradition, as it is codified in our political, religious and cultural institutions, tends to preserve the exact wording of culturally significant texts. Such texts express the cultural, legal, religious or esthetic values of a society, for example, prayers and inspirational texts, patriotic texts such as the Pledge of Allegiance, legal texts and constitutional documents, oaths and vows, hymns, songs, and poetry. Our political structure is founded on a text, the Constitution. Oaths of office, which are in themselves formulaic texts, are sworn to uphold the Constitution, i.e., to continue to bring our political conduct in conformity with our legislated interpretation of its wording. As an example, take the text of the Second Amendment:

> A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the
> security of a free State, the right of the people
> to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

The historical justification for the right to bear arms is included in the wording of the amendment. This historical justification, "a well regulated Militia," is now obsolete, since the United States has both a standing army and a National Guard. The necessity for national self-defense has little to do today with the problem of crime in the streets of our inner cities. Yet the amendment has always been legally interpreted as guaranteeing the right of American citizens to bear arms. The wording of the text, which includes the phrase "the right... shall not be infringed," has precluded a different interpretation.

The importance of the wording of a text in the act of expression is most obvious in the case of poetry. It is often said that a poem is untranslatable. Either a translation or a

paraphrase of the original is not the same as the original itself. In a poem, the words themselves matter, as opposed to merely the "message." One could argue that a poem is the prototypical act of expression, although in any act of expression the wording matters. As an example of a poem, take Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "God's Grandeur":

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
>
> And for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
> And though the last lights off the black West went,
> Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The language of the poem is deliberately charged with the meaning of words, mirroring the chief metaphor of the poem, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Meaning is conveyed through metaphor, personification ("wears man's smudge and shares man's smell"), simile ("like shining from shook foil"; "like the ooze of oil/ Crushed"), and visionary imagery ("the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast"). Literary devices include enjambement ("the ooze of oil/Crushed"; "the Holy Ghost over the bent/World"), repetition ("have trod, have trod, have trod"), internal rhyme ("seared... bleared, smeared"), and alliteration ("Shining... shook", "reck... rod", "smeared... smudge... smell"; "foot feel", "last lights", "brown brink"). The wording is in places unusual or archaic: "reck his rod" means "obey his commands, be fearful of his judgment," where "reck" has the same root as "reckoning." It is evident that every word in this poem matters, and that it cannot be translated or paraphrased without its becoming an entirely different text than the original. Thus the act of expression alone is paramount, over and above the act of the communication of the poem to the reader. The reader is invited not to directly respond, as in the case of the act of communication in an ordinary conversation, but to recite the words aloud, to contemplate and to appreciate the text.

Expression and Communication

The translation of a literary text is an attempt at the communication of thoughts which have already been expressed and which bear the stamp of authorship, through equivalent expression in a language foreign to the author. Indeed, any attempt at communication involves an attempt at expression, and a failure or breakdown in communication is the result of failure to find adequate or equivalent expression. Thus, expression underlies communication, and any view which recognizes the relevance of the process of communication for linguistic theory should also recognize the relevance of the process of expression. Expression is a semiotic process of the encoding of thought into signs, or words, and verbal expression can be compared to other symbolic systems, e.g., mathematics, music, and art. The semiotic system of natural language shows a complex relationship between fixed and created meaning, i.e., meaning which is assigned to the word or utterance by virtue of its participation in the code, vs. meaning which is individually created, in the dimension of language use. The meaning which an utterance has by virtue of its participation in the linguistic code is its communicative function, while the meaning which an utterance has which is unique to itself, individually authored as a text, is its expressive function.

The relationship between the communicative and expressive function in language can be examined on the example of semantic change. That the meanings of words change over time is evidence of the relevance of the expressive function for the linguistic code. Semantic change is the result of the polysemy of words in the synchronic state of the language, coupled with an aggregate mass of individual usage leading to language change. As Saussure suggested, diachronic change in *la langue* or the linguistic code, arises because of individual acts in the dimension of *parole* or language use. However, unlike in Saussure's conception, these acts are not mere unsystematic and accidental errors, but consequences of the individual's will to express. Changes in the linguistic code in the aggregate are unconscious in the sense of being independent of any one individual's will, and being accepted or acquiesced to by users of the code. However, these aggregate changes originate in the original choice of expression which may have involved the participation of the individual's will, whether conscious or semi-conscious. For example, witness the adoption of new terms in teenage slang, e.g., "awesome," (which has changed meaning from "imposing" to "terrific"), "cool," (which has changed meaning from "cold" to "nice", "with it"), leading to acceptance of the new usage in the linguistic code, e.g., "gay" (which has changed meaning from "joyful" to "homosexual"). The attempts in American society to use non-sexist language, e.g., "he or she," "chairperson," are also examples of conscious usage. Thus, the dimension of expression, involving the act of individual will, allows for conscious choice, and leads to semantic change which is then unconsciously adopted or learned from the linguistic code by new speakers. There is thus an intimate relationship between the individual and social dimensions in language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between the two basic linguistic functions of communication and expression is summarized in Figure 1. The social dimension in language involves the act of communication. Factors which promote or constrain communication are the processes of understanding and interpretation, or translation in the case of communication between different languages or cultures. The individual dimension in language involves the act of expression. Expression is the act of putting thought into verbal form, which involves the encoding or creation of a text or utterance. The individual engages in language as both a speaker/listener and a writer/reader, and this engagement involves both acts of expression and communication. The act of expression is the domain of linguistic creativity, which is not the mere mechanical production of an utterance according to the grammatical rules of the linguistic code, but also the creation of a unique text with individual meaning. Texts, which are open to the negotiation of interpretation, but which preserve their own unique wording, assume an important function in society. Such are the texts of laws, religion, and literature. Expression is therefore a prerequisite to communication, and is a more fundamental function of language than communication alone. Therefore, any theory of linguistic creativity should take account of the dimension of expression. Creativity is not merely the capacity to produce sentences, as Chomsky would argue, but the ability to express complex thought. Linguistic theory should take into account the individual dimension of language, and the fundamental ability to express thought and produce complex text. This paper has argued for the importance of the two basic functions of language, communication and expression. The individual in the process of language use engages in both these functions. Therefore, a comprehensive account of language use, over and above language form, is relevant for general linguistic theory.

Notes

1. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics.* Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.
2. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax,* p.3. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1965.

Figure 1

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