On using linguistic tools

Fundamentals (axioms):

1. Language is an instrument of communication.
2. Humans use language to advance purposeful ends.

Goal of linguistic theory:

- Account for the distribution of forms – why do the sound waves or the markings distribute as they do.

How should we account for the distribution of forms?

Diver explains in Theory that we want to understand “the motivation for the particular form taken by sound waves produced by the human vocal apparatus”, and to do that the analyst should seek “the causes that produce effects; […] the motivation that leads the speaker to produce a certain sequence of sound waves” (my italics).

 Orientations:

- Communicative
- Human

Theoretical Entities:

The sign, the union of a signal and a meaning, forms the building block of linguistic systems. It is the meaning portion that is to explain the distribution of forms. How so?

- Language is a communicative instrument: speakers deploy signs to advance purposeful ends. A sign is chosen to be deployed by virtue of its meaning. Certain meanings are appropriate contributors to certain messages communicated.

- Humans use language: though the meanings are sparse in content, intelligent humans, who are normally the audience of linguistic interchanges, are capable, by virtue of their intelligence, of inferring full messages emergent from such sparse content.

- Question: We say messages are inferred by hearers, but are messages also put together by speakers? More specifically, are messages emergent in the mind of the speaker from some low-content signs, as a result of the speaker’s own intelligence, similar to how messages emerge when the hearer hears?

Data:
That was interesting for me – 7,570,000

That was interesting – 109,000,000

Wow, that was interesting for me – 109,000,000

That hurt me – 2,980,000

That hurt – 7,600,000

God damn that hurt me – 7,600,000

God damn that hurt – 55,200

Oh fuck that hurt me – 4

Oh fuck that hurt – 64,800

It is tasty to me – 36,400

It is tasty – 4,620,000

Man it is tasty to me – 1

Man it is tasty – 392,000

Wow it is tasty to me – 1

Wow it is tasty – 1,280,000

Yum it is tasty to me – 1

Yum it is tasty – 6,170

Mmm it is tasty to me – 1

Mmm it is tasty – 39,300

**Distributional fact:** It should seem that whenever an interjection starts off these utterances then reference to the speaker is precluded. This is consistent across many more similar lexical items (great, good, wonderful, boring etc. or yuck, oh gosh, damn it, oh shit etc.) and in several languages as well.

Is the lexical meaning of the various interjections incompatible with the meaning of the first person pronoun? What is the explanation for this distributional asymmetry?

**My Tactic for Answering:** Assume that the verb “use” is the same verb “use” when we say either (a) or (b):

a. He uses a physical-tool (e.g. a hammer or a car)
b. He uses a linguistic-tool (e.g. the sign-type “the” or the expression-type “the soup is tasty”).

**What is involved in using then?**

Physical tools:

- In order for using to take place there must be something that is used. One cannot use while using nothing at all. So using requires there being some object used, e.g. a hammer, a screwdriver, a tooth-brush, a car, a spatula, a spoon, etc.

- When one uses something, one is doing something. When one uses a hammer, one (usually) hammers, when one uses a tooth-brush one (usually) brushes one’s teeth, when one uses a car one (usually) drives across terrain, when one uses a spoon one (usually) picks up portions of food, etc.
- We say, then, that someone *uses* something to *do* something. Since the user is an intelligent human, it is but expected that a particular *object* will be used to perform a certain task, *because* that object has certain properties, by virtue of which the object is *suitable* for the performance of the task at hand.

Or looking at it from the other direction: faced with a particular goal/will to perform some task, an intelligent human searches for an object which, once deployed, will most successfully accomplish that which is desired.

Thus, for example, humans use hammers to put nails in the wall and cars to drive across terrain, but not hammers to drive across terrain or cars to put in nails in the wall. Each tool, by virtue of its structure, is deployed to achieve different ends.

- The same object can be *used* on different occasions to perform various and innovative tasks. Thus one may use a hammer also to break open a piggy-bank or perhaps to hit someone on the head. Still, and importantly so, there are limits. One cannot use a hammer to drive across terrain or to brush one’s teeth. The *structure* of the tool constrains its possible *uses* in any event.

**Linguistic tools:**

The tactic, to repeat, is to treat the verb “use” as the *same* verb “use” when we use linguistic tools as when we use physical tools. Therefore:

- When we use language, there must be *something* that is being used.

- When one uses language, one is *doing* something.

- When someone *utters* something (i.e. uses language), one is *doing* something. As it is intelligent humans who use language, then it is but expected that a particular object (linguistic tool) will be used to perform a particular task, *because* that object has certain properties which make it quite suitable for the performance of that task.

- The same object (the same linguistic-tool) can be used on different occasions to perform various and innovative tasks. Still, there are limits. One cannot just use any object to perform just any task. The object used must have certain properties, by virtue of which it becomes a suitable object to use for whatever task is at hand.

*So now we ask:*
I. What are linguistic tools? What is it that speakers use when they talk?
II. And further, whatever it is linguistic tools might be, there is also the question: What are the ends? What is it that speakers are doing when they talk?

Let’s take the second question first, and start by looking to physical tools again.

Physical tools:

Someone used a car – what did he do?

A. He positioned his body in a certain way; he pressed his foot at times and at times let it loose; he clutched his hand in a certain way and at times opened it, etc.
B. He drove across terrain.
C. He went to work.

It should be noted that using a car, like using many tools, involves also the using of some other tools which are sub-components of the car. So for example, when one is using a car, one is using a gas pedal or a driving stick, etc.

Linguistic tools:

Someone uttered “I apologize” – what did he do?

A. 1. He made some noises.
   2. He made noises which belong to and are intended to be recognized so as to belonging to a certain vocabulary and adhering to a certain grammar; that is (perhaps), he uttered signals, each with a meaning.
B. He apologized.
C. He made peace with his friend.

Acts of type A are the performance of locutionary acts: the uttering of some noises which belong to and are intended to be recognized as belonging to a certain vocabulary and adhering to a particular grammar. To say, for example: John said “I apologize” is to report a locutionary act.

Acts of type B are the performance of illocutionary acts: the conventional force of the utterance, in a particular speech situation. To say, for example: John apologized is to report an illocutionary act.

Acts of type C are the performance of perlocutionary acts: the ad-hoc effects or consequences of the illocutionary act.
**The claim is:**

Acts of type B, the illocutionary acts, are unique, in that they alone denote the *uses* of (linguistic) tools, properly speaking. How so?

When we say that someone *uses* something to *do* something, we have in mind some *end* which the using of some object, the tool, advances. The achieving of that *end* is the *use* of the tool, properly speaking. Thus:

- Acts of type A cannot denote, properly speaking, the *uses* of tools, seeing as, for example with cars, sitting in a certain position, moving your hand and foot a certain way, etc. *or* with language, making certain noises, making certain noises which belong to a certain vocabulary and adhere to a certain grammar – all of these are not themselves thought of as *ends* (usually, at least). Rather, there is usually some reason *why* an intelligent human moves his foot as he does, or utters certain signs, and it is that which we are after when we seek the *uses* of the tool.

- Acts of type C cannot denote, properly speaking, the uses of tools, either. The use of a car cannot be to go to work, as the use of “I apologize” cannot be to make peace with your friend. These are *ad-hoc* consequences, only indirectly linked to the proper *use* of the car – i.e. to drive across terrain, or to the proper *use* of “I apologize” – i.e. to apologize. Indeed, on one occasion we use a car to get to work and on another to get to the supermarket and so and so forth. But in all these cases, the *same* use of the car is made, which brings us to act B:

- Acts of type B denote the *uses* of tools, properly speaking. One deploys a car to drive across terrain, as one deploys “I apologize” to apologize – whatever additional consequences the using of these tools might produce, intentionally or not.

Illocutionary acts denote *categories of use*: **Speakers use language to do things**

- What we *do*, properly speaking, when we talk is *perform illocutionary acts*. For example, we thank, apologize, promise, marry, report, name, bet, advise, warn, recommend, opine, ask, display, predict, guess, etc.
- Speakers *do* these and many more things when talking.
- Diver wrote that we want to understand “*the motivation that leads the speaker* to produce a certain sequence of sound waves”.

**Illocutionary acts are conventional:** This means that the act exists only to the extent that all interlocutors involved know/are familiar with the practice of doing *that*. So for example, the social conduct in North America is such that people who live here know what to apologize, to promise, to report or to marry is. We are all familiar with such practices. There is no such thing
as to promise outside of some social context, where at least two individual “agree” or “accept” that some practice exists.

- While some of these acts may be performed by non-linguistic means, for the vast majority of them and on the vast majority of cases, the leading factor in the performance of these acts is the saying of some words. Hence we call these: speech acts.

**The doctrine of infelicities to explain the conventions involved:**

In order to discover what is involved in the convention of a certain speech act, it is instructive to consider what can go wrong in the performance of the act.

- For example, the act of promising might go wrong if I promise to do something which I believe that I cannot do, e.g. if I promise to grow wings. From this we can deduce that what is conventionally involved in the act of promising is that the performer of the act believes that he is capable of bringing about the object of the promise.

- Or consider the act of betting: betting might go wrong if I place my bet as soon as the race is over. Thus we learn that the conventional act of betting requires that the performer of the act doesn’t already know the outcome of the object of the bet.

- Or consider marrying: marrying might go wrong if one of the two individuals is already married. Thus we learn that the conventional act of marrying requires that the two parties will both be bachelors at the time of the ceremony.

Very generally, there are two types of infelicities:

- **Misfires** – the act is attempted but not achieved. For example, I say “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” when I have not been appointed the person to name the ship – I have then not named the ship.

- **Abuses** – The act is indeed performed, though the performer of the act lacks certain thoughts, feelings or intentions which he is expected to have when performing the act. Thus if I say “I promise to come to the party” in the right circumstances, I may, in saying that, successfully promise to come to the party. And yet, if I have no intention to come to the part, at the time of uttering these words, then I have abused the practice of promising – I have promised, but my act is, in a sense, hollow.
**Linguistic-tools – The means employed to do Illocutionary Acts**

**Convention again:** The means employed to perform illocutionary acts are conventional too. The sense in which the means are conventional is that, again, it must be agreed or accepted by at least two individuals that the *saying of something is the doing of something*. To this extent, CS signs are conventional too, for a sign is utterly useless if only a single individual knows it. In talking to one another, in communicating, we rely on the assumption that what I take, e.g., the signal “the” to *mean* is also what you take it to mean. It is by virtue of such conventions that we successfully deploy linguistic tools.

**Returning now to the first question then:** We are starting to get a sense of what speakers do when they talk, and so next we want to answer: what are the objects that speakers use to do these things with?

Suppose that what you want to do is to promise to come to the party. What tools can you use that will pull that off? Here are some suggestions we are all quite familiar with:

- I promise to come to the party.
- I’ll come to the party.
- I’ll be there.
- I will definitely see you at the party.
- I’m coming to the party.

Each of the above is a different *expression-type*; each, by virtue of its structural properties makes for an appropriate tool to use *in a particular speech situation* to promise to come to some particular party.

To be sure, there are other expression-types speakers might use in a particular speech situation to promise to come to some party, but there are limits. Expression-types, such as, “the soup is on the stove” or “thanks for everything” or “be right back” are rather poor tools to use to promise to come to some party, much like a hammer is a poor tool to use to drive on terrain.

Also to be sure, any of the expression-types above might be used for purposes other than to promise to come to some party. For example, in saying “I’ll be there” *in a particular speech situation* one might simply be predicting his future whereabouts, or in saying “I promise to come” *in a particular speech situation* one might be reporting on some past event, e.g. I might be telling you that “in this note I promise to come”. But there are limits here too. One is rather less likely to use the tool, say, “I’m coming to the party” to display gastronomic pleasure of soup, or to report that it just started raining.

**Identity of an expression-type:** An expression-type may be identified whenever we can relate some linguistic structure to some illocutionary act. A single sign may be an expression-type: In saying “Ricardo” I called Ricardo. The expression-type “Ricardo”, by virtue of its structure, may
be a good tool to use in a particular speech situation to call Ricardo. Or “welcome” may be an expression-type which, by virtue of its structure, is a good tool to use in a particular speech situation to welcome someone into your home. Or “BULL!” may be an expression-type, which by virtue of its structure may be used in a particular speech situation to warn someone of an approaching bull.

It is important to note that we do not expect the bi-unique relation that exists between signals and their meanings, to also exist between expression-types and the speech acts they are used to perform. Speech acts refer to uses of the linguistic system, and so they do not form any part whatsoever in the structure of the language. Putting nails in walls is not part of the structure of the hammer, it is its use. As mentioned, one can make varied and innovative uses of the same tool (as one can, say, use a chair to reach high). Thus a single expression-type, though it may well quite regularly be used to perform a certain speech act, may also be used to perform other speech acts, and may be used in ever innovative ways. But there are predictable limits. Still, certain expression-types are regularly and predictably used in the performance of certain speech acts as they are quite well suited – by virtue of their structure – to perform that act. So much like a chair is regularly and predictably used for sitting, “It just started raining” is regularly and predictably used to report that it just started raining. In both cases understanding the structure of the tool should make it plain why people choose to use it as they do.

**Why should we posit expression-types on top of signs?**

1. The *sum is greater than its parts* argument: the fact that A+B=A+B doesn’t yet mean that A+B doesn’t also equal C.

For example, the heart and lungs and other organs each make their independent and consistent contribution wherever they’re found. This doesn’t mean that a human is a heart+eyes+lungs+liver+etc. Should biologists not study organisms because the individual organs can be understood and analyzed each independently? Things don’t exist in a vacuum. There are no hearts out there or lungs. There are organisms that have these parts. Without the organisms there aren’t the parts either.

It is the same with physical tools. Searching Google Images for “handle” yields results such as the following:
Certainly the similarity is not coincidental, and has to do with the human user, who has hands of a certain size which make this long slender shape a suitable one to use as a handle. So if we were, say, to develop a theory that aims to account for the distribution of human-produced shapes, we can account for the distribution of this shape independently of the tool it is a part of and quite consistently so in the human household – humans put this shape in the household where they do because it is easy to grasp and hold it. But does that deny the independent existence, the tool status, of the knife or the drawer or the door? Are not those tools too; and rightfully so, for they are objects which by virtue of their structure are appropriate to perform a certain task?

Another example: each part of a car makes its independent and consistent contribution. An engine, in fact, makes the same contribution whether it is found in a car, a truck, a tractor or a boat. So does that mean the engineer did not make, and that humans don’t use cars? An engine+tires+carburetor etc. are not merely a collection of parts – they are a car. The sum is greater than its parts.

2. **Human-factor and communicative orientations argument**: People do things when they talk. There’s a reason to why people say what they do. Why state these reasons only at the level of the sign?

CS may explain that in using, for example, the sign “the” the speaker was hinting that a particular bounded object is talked about. Fair enough. Notice though that this is parallel to saying that in using a handle the person was holding something. True, but the handle is not there in a vacuum, and neither is “the”. There is something here which the person intended to do, and that certainly was not to hold something, nor was it to hint that something is bounded – these are not the end if we really take in the human – the user’s perspective. The person, rather, desires to brush, or perhaps to hammer, or maybe to open, or perhaps to scrape, etc. The handle is where it is because humans want to do these things, not because humans want to hold things. Humans want to hold things, only to the extent that it is conducive to the successful performance of these other acts, like hammering or brushing.

Recognizing the hammer as a tool in its own right takes nothing away from the role of the handle. Instead it affords us a more comprehensive explanation of the distribution of the long slender shape, for now we see the tool that motivated its presence. It is the hammer that brought a human to deploy a handle, and in the same way it was, for example, the expression-type “the soup is tasty” that brought a human to deploy “the” in displaying gastronomic pleasure of some particular bounded soup.
Taking the human factor and communicative orientations, should we not expect that the way humans interact with tools generally will be parallel to the ways humans interact with linguistic tools? Does a human put together a handle to a blade every time he wants to cut? Intelligent, pattern-seeking, humans realize soon enough that certain things go together in certain ways so as to make something grander than the parts, and that can perform a particular task. Is it sensible to say that one doesn’t use a knife, but rather only uses a handle and also uses a blade? Is that really giving credit to the intelligent human who has some end in mind which he wishes to achieve?

3. **Distributional asymmetries argument**: Expression-types enable us to account for the distribution of forms.

The explanation for the data presented at the start goes as follows: Since it is only possible, in principle, to display one’s own experiences or feelings, I predict that when what speakers are doing is displaying (i.e. when this illocutionary act is performed) then they will not make reference to themselves. The rationale is that it is otiose to refer to oneself when displaying. It is just all too obvious that it is you if what you do is to display.

I am explaining why certain linguistic tools, certain expression-types, are used, and hence why we find certain forms where we do. When speakers display, then they predictably don’t make reference to themselves, as this is otiose when displaying. So when we meet I say “it’s good to see you” not “it’s good for me to see you” – because I am not reporting that it is good but displaying (or showing you or expressing) that it is. Likewise we say when we encounter a new person: “it’s nice to meet you” and not “it’s nice for me to meet you”, and for the same rationale.

Recognizing and understanding expression-types, on top of signs, affords the analyst theoretical means to speak of illocutionary acts, i.e. the uses of linguistic tools – which in turn proves conducive to accounting for the distribution of forms, as it gives us insight into the human user’s communicative motivation for producing any sign at all and that is, to perform that illocutionary act (whatever it might be).

**Bibliography:**