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On the Distortion of Sequential Consistency in Spoken Discourse

The present paper regards the operational aspect of verbal interaction as a cognitive process governed by rules and regulations providing its felicitous accomplishment. It supports the view that the consistent nature of goal-aimed interaction should necessarily manifest itself in sequential ties, the so-called Communicative Harmony Determinants (Cohesion, Coherence, Relevance), which exist between the consecutive moves of speaking partners.

The analysis carried out in the paper shows that exchanges in which the moves of the speakers are chained by the Communicative Harmony Determinants make a compatible type of discourse in which the utterance links are unimpaired. Compatible discourse is usually felicitous, that is, it is a cooperative type of verbal interaction where the process of exchange of ideas takes place through consistent sequential ties, and the act of verbal interaction results in the successful accomplishment of the communicative goal. Accordingly, as a result of violation of the ties providing a compatible succession of utterances, there appears distortion of sequential consistency bringing about an incompatible type of discourse. To illustrate the cases of sequential inconsistency, the paper focuses on the analysis of communicative units in which the relevance ties are broken. The interactional approach reveals sequential inconsistencies which may be located both in the speaker's and in the interlocutor's speech domains, and appear during the joint development of verbal interaction, irrespective of the type of verbal behaviour – co-operative or contradictory.

One of the most important findings of the paper is that the communicative infelicity that manifests itself in the distortion of sequential ties is not only a linguistic but also a complex internal phenomenon related to the cognitive and socio-psychological aspects of human behaviour.

1. Introduction

When we state that human beings are social creatures, we mean that their actions are socially structured. Communication is an instance of social actions which advances through coherent verbal actions of

speaking partners conjoined by common topics and communicative goals. In the normal course of events the actions of the speakers are usually interlinked so that verbal interaction is maintained with the succession of interwoven chains of moves. Each of the adjacent parts that forms a communicative move – initiation or response – is the result of mental work and is correlative by nature.

The aim of the present paper is to focus on the operational aspect of verbal behaviour, regarding the latter as a cognitive process that is governed by special rules and regulations. In particular, our prime concern in this matter is to assess the accomplishment of verbal interaction as felicitous or infelicitous. For that purpose we shall examine cases of sequential inconsistency that develop in the process of interaction when one of the successive utterance ties, that of relevance, is broken.

So far a great deal of research work has been carried out to define ways of assessing communicative success as well as to determine means and procedures for grading communicative or pragmatic failure, the notion of communicative success or felicity being traditionally attributed either to the successful performance of the illocutionary force of a single speech act or to the favourable realization of the pragmatic intent of the interaction (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Edmondson 1983; Brown & Yule 1983; Drew 2003). Much of recent research work has also been devoted to the acknowledgement of certain linguistic and extralinguistic factors that hinder the process of communication, making it defective (Smirnova 2003; Sadykova 2004).

Scholars, however, seem to differ in their evaluation of the notion of communicative success and before presenting my own standpoint, I intend to highlight some shortcomings in this field of research. One of them can be formulated as disregard for the correlative nature of interaction. As a result, cases of communicative failure are located in one of the moves forming the exchange, usually the initiating one. As it is, the second move of the exchange, the response, mainly performs a metacommunicative function: it indicates the fault or imperfection that has been traced in the initiating move and asks for repair.

The next shortcoming that can be mentioned in this connection is the prime focus on the explicit, overt markers of communicative failure. Verbal interaction is undoubtedly a cognitive process, an integrated and

concordant framework of different minds that interlink to bring about a new state of things, a unique and superior form of discursive knowledge. Nevertheless, a great deal of mental work in the process of communication is done implicitly, which means that the communicative failures that supposedly arise in the process of verbal interaction may remain unveiled and need special methods of disclosure.

2. Sequencing in goal-aimed interaction

I assume that the consistent nature of goal-aimed interaction should necessarily manifest itself in sequencing links that exist between the consecutive moves of speaking partners. Therefore, in order to develop an efficient technique which could reveal the explicit as well as implicit failures in the process of interaction – whether caused by the speaker or the interlocutor – it is necessary to examine the rules of sequencing.

I have stated in an earlier article (Paronyan 2004) that the interconnection of the consecutive moves is performed through sequential ties. Looking at these ties as bridges between utterances that help to promote a smooth and felicitous interaction, I have proposed to call them Communicative Harmony Determinants. The latter present three aspects of sequential ties, three important factors which "facilitate the total interpretation of discourse": Cohesion, Coherence, and Relevance (Paronyan 2004: 44).

Cohesion establishes formal links between clauses through such means as deixis, reference, replacement, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, etc. and refers to overt features of discourse which provide surface evidence for unity and correctness on the locutionary level. Coherence concerns the pragmatic ties (the succession of illocutionary as well as interactional acts) based on our general socio-cultural knowledge of stereotypic scripts. Moreover, it includes the notion of certain textual relations which are inferred but not expressed explicitly. Finally, Relevance is an implicit cognitive-functional means of linking utterances that provides an adequate interpretation of actual information – the communicative focus of interaction.

One of the advantages of my notion of sequential ties is that the exchanges in which the moves of the speakers are chained by the

Communicative Harmony Determinants are found as a compatible type of discourse in which the utterance links are unimpaired. In compatible discourse all the unity factors work flawlessly, creating an adequate and consistent succession of verbal actions and contributing to the accomplishment of communicative goals. In this type of discourse a cooperative type of verbal behaviour, where the partners share similar interests, standpoints, harmonious motives, is created.

To illustrate the point, let us examine the following exchange taken from a modern English play in which the interplay of Communicative Harmony Determinants results in a compatible cooperative discourse.

> (1) Jenny: Where is that?
>   Leonie: In Wimpole Street, you know? [C. E.G.: 154]

In this exchange cohesion is realized with the help of structural-semantic ties (deixis, predication, ellipsis). Coherence is materialized in the form of compatible successive interactional (seeking information – informing) and illocutionary (special question – statement) acts. The response is relevant to the initiation since the answer includes actual information. Hence, as a result of a threefold linkage, this exchange becomes compatible: the communicative aim is realized successfully since the speaker asks for information and gets it and, besides, the process of interaction proceeds without discord and communicative confrontation.

As already stated, speech is a goal-directed action and the accomplishment of the communicative goal (one of the main directions of its expansion through time and space) needs some verbal effort on the part of the interlocutors. When the speaker does not get the information adequate for his mental needs, he makes a number of successive moves, step by step filling the 'gaps' with the necessary knowledge. No doubt, the success of this communicative strategy generally depends on the disposition of the interlocutor and his/her willingness to co-operate. To prove this, let us look at the following exchange:

> (2) "What did he kill himself for?"
>   "How should I know."

"How did he do it?"
"He hung himself with a rope".
"Who cut him down?"
"His niece".
"Why did he do it?"
"Fear for his soul." [H. C. Sh. St.: 289]

In the first exchange of this transaction we can notice some inconsistency in the maintenance of cohesion and coherence links. The responding move is an instance of echo-questioning which violates the expected sequence of the interactional and illocutionary acts: 'question – answer'. By deviating from the communicative norm, the interlocutor stresses his negative predisposition towards the topic and implies that he does not want to discuss it: "How should I know." Realizing this fact, the speaker decides to change the strategy of inquiry. First, he wants to make sure that, after all, the interlocutor is willing to cooperate without violating the maxim of quality and saying something about which he has no exact evidence (Grice 1975). That is why he tries to get information concerning different elements of the communicative situation, e.g. the doer of the action, the manner of the action: "Who cut him down?", "How did he do it?" All these questions get consistent response in the course of inquiry, which comes to prove that the speaker's strategy was justified. Finally, in the fourth exchange, the speaker returns to his initial quest: "Why did he do it?" As we can see, when formulating this interrogative utterance, the speaker changes the communicative tactics of the information search. The specifying question "**What** did he kill himself **for**?" elicited in the first exchange presupposes a clear formulation of the purpose of the action. Meanwhile, in the fourth exchange, the quest is replaced by another question-word, 'why'. Now, the question-words 'what... for' and 'why' might be considered communicatively equal, but they appear to be subtly different cognitively. First of all, the question-word 'why' has a broader meaning and does not presuppose objective and exact display of knowledge concerning the cause of the action. Furthermore, in this interrogative utterance the speaker reformulates the propositional act: the phrase 'kill himself' is replaced by another one, 'do it', which unmistakably expresses the meaning of action vaguely. Evidently, the speaker avoids

directly referring to the action which has caused his interlocutor much trouble; he simply prefers not to utter what his partner is unwilling to hear. Since this time the interlocutor is given a chance to give his subjective evaluation of some past action, his response is compatible with the question. As a result, the communicative goal of the interaction is realized, bringing it to a successful close.

It appears, therefore, that compatible discourse is usually felicitous, that is, it presents a cooperative type of verbal interaction where the process of exchange of ideas takes place through consistent sequential ties, and the act of verbal interaction results in the successful accomplishment of the communicative goal. Accordingly, the violation of any of the sequential ties that takes place in the process of verbal interaction disrupts the consistency of the adjacent moves and makes communication faulty, imperfect. We assume that the communicative infelicity that manifests itself in the distortion of sequential ties is a complex internal phenomenon related to the cognitive and socio-psychological aspects of human behaviour. Moreover, besides being a kind of incongruity of the normal verbal route, it is also a kind of digression in the natural course of ideas, as well as deviation from the expected social behaviour. These findings leave us with the conclusion that very often sequential inconsistencies emerge as a result of certain mental work and depend upon the type of verbal behaviour, often appearing in contradictory types of discourse where the speakers have opposing interests and motives. Thus as a result of sequential inconsistency an incompatible type of discourse develops, in which the utterance links are distorted.

Before we have examined the case of sequential inconsistency in terms of the distortion of relevance links. I interpret the notion of relevance as an implicit means of linkage that has to do with the logical placement of the communicative focus within the frames of correlative utterances, as a silent performance of cognitive faculties owing to which the adjacent utterances get closely linked in accordance with current communicative meaning. The distortion of the relevance factor means that the logical development of the thing that is being discussed or of what is taking place in the given exchange is distorted. Therefore, the piece of talk or any move that is inappropriate for the given point of talk should be considered as non-relevant.

In this connection we would like to clarify two points. First, we distinguish the term 'non-relevant', as it is used in this paper, from its 'lay' counterpart – 'irrelevant'. Secondly, we strongly believe that the thematic factor should not be identified with relevance. One thing is obvious: semantic deviations related to the appropriateness of the responding move to the topic of conversation should be treated as instances of relevance violation. On the other hand, the move that is interlinked with the current topic but fails to meet the requirements of the focus of communication and distorts the themo-rhematic chain of interaction should be considered as non-relevant. As we can see, non-relevance is the distortion of semantic ties which occurs when the implicit mental placement of the new/old, adequate/inadequate knowledge chunks of the utterances is broken.

To illustrate the cases of sequential inconsistency, let us examine communicative units in which the relevance ties are broken. In the following exchange the response is inadequate for the communicative focus of interaction:

> (3) Roche: The moment I draw my wage, I'll be away from this. Into the town.//
> Jim: Going to Brummagem, Shakespeare?
> Roche: I'll not stay here, now that none of youse need me any more... [.R.N.C.: 126]

The statement that follows the question does not contain the actual information, that is, verification of the truth of proposition. The question focuses on the affirmative/negative evaluation of some hypothetical information, assertion of the propositional truth of the question, while the response focalizes a different semantic element of the communicative situation – that of cause – which is quite unimportant at the point of talk. Thus, instead of confirming the fact, the interlocutor begins to explain the reason for his departure and 'splits' the themo-rhematic chain. As a result, relevance ties between the two successive moves are broken: "I'll not stay here, now that none of youse need me any more..." The fact of non-relevant response brings about sequential inconsistency, which makes the process of interaction infelicitous.

My analysis shows that non-relevance can be either deliberate, that is, premeditated, or spontaneous. Premeditated non-relevance occurs in situations when one of the speakers does not want to speak to the point intentionally and shifts the focus of communication in his/her responding move. Deliberate non-relevance emerges as a result of some subjective variable factors present in the communicative situation: mood, motives, emotions, predisposition, etc. And it is natural that we often come across this type of non-relevance in contradictory types of discourse where speakers stand in disagreement and quarrel. Let us examine a case where the factor of relevance is distorted:

> (4)   George: What do you think you're doing?
>   Honey: Violence! Violence! [A.W.W.: 135]

George does not approve of his guest's behaviour, who has drunk too much and is dancing in the living room. He criticizes Honey's behaviour in the form of indirect reproach, formulating it as an interrogative utterance: "What do you think you're doing?". Grasping George's negative, unfavourable estimation, Honey takes this for an attempt to humiliate her and begins to complain: "Violence! Violence!" Her response is an act of complaint deviating from the logical development of criticism, the latter being usually performed with such verbal actions as admission, denial or apology. Breaking the socio-communicative norms of interaction, the interlocutor focuses on the perlocutionary effect of the speaker's move – humiliation. As we can see, relevance ties are broken and, as a result, the process of interaction becomes infelicitous.

In the following exchange the interlocutor breaks the semantic ties with the previous utterance and expresses his emotional attitude to the action performed by the speaker:

> (5)   George: What are they doing up there? I assume that's where they are.
>   Nick: (with false heartiness) You know women. [A.W.W.: 90]

George, who is looking for his wife Martha, sounds nervous and discontented. Interestingly enough, his disapproval also concerns Nick's wife's behaviour, with whom Martha has gone away: "What are **they**

doing up there?" Interpreting George's resentment as an attempt to criticize his wife, Nick is trying to calm him down and avert growth of conflict. In his answer we can trace semantic inadequacy of the communicative focus: the question requires explication of the action, meanwhile the answer contains the statement of some general fact which presupposes affirmation based on a certain amount of mutual background knowledge*:* "You know women." As we can deduce from the author's remark, (with false heartiness), Nick makes a deductive ironical inference and attributes the negative trait which is inherent to George's wife (her tendency to be late) to all women in general. Thus, instead of replying to the propositional content of the question, Nick responds to its emotional aspect, trying to ease the negative perlocutionary effect of the speaker's criticism. Since Nick's response displays deviation from the communicative focus, the relevance links become distorted, resulting in sequential inconsistency. In this exchange we can see a contradictory type of discourse, in which the communicative goal is not realized.

In the example below we see a piece of conflict talk, where the deliberate non-relevance emerges because of tense relationships between husband and wife:

> (6) Ruth: What's that you're eating?
>   Norman: Since when do you worry about me?
>   Ruth: Of course I do. Now and then. Don't be tiresome. [A.N.Q.: 48]

Instead of answering the explicative question and disclosing the object of action, Norman changes the focus of communication by criticizing the interlocutor: "Since when do you worry about me?" The echo-question is not an answer to the question but indirect reproach, an act of criticism concerning the speaker's behaviour. Realizing this deviation in the communicative focus, Ruth first of all tries to justify herself by means of the statements: "Of course I do. Now and then." After this, she changes her language strategy and provokes a counter-attack, criticizing Norman's behaviour. Thus, relevance ties are broken because of the partners' opposing viewpoints. This violation brings about distortion of sequential consistency, hinders accomplishment of the communicative goal and, finally, results in incompatible and contradictory discourse.

Spontaneous non-relevance may emerge as a result of natural development in the course of interaction. In certain communicative situations the partners may shift the communicative focus spontaneously. Responding to the needs of current communication, they may place semantically inadequate chunks of knowledge together. In the following exchange spontaneous non-relevance is the consequence of a communicative mistake which occurs in the process of interaction. The partners do not share the same views and each of them interprets the problem of communicative situation individually:

> (7) Sarah: Will you not refer to Mother like that.
> Norman: Oh, come on. She's not your Mother. She's not my Mother. She's a mother-in-law. Fair game? I'll call her what I like. You ought to hear what Annie calls her sometimes...// Anyway, we happen to love each other. Me and Annie, that is, not me and mother-in-law. [A.N.Q.: 48]

The initiating move is an instance of indirect reproach, in which the speaker criticizes her interlocutor's behaviour towards a non-participant who is not present at the actual conversation. Unwilling to discuss his own behaviour and to oppose criticism, the interlocutor changes the communicative focus, and centres it on the social role of the non-participant. In doing so, he justifies his misconduct indirectly: "She's not your Mother. She's not my Mother. She's a mother-in-law." The factor of relevance is distorted because the interlocutor rejects the unfair criticism and tries to invalidate it.

In the following exchange the displaced communicative focus causes violation of the relevance factor.

> (8) Juanita: They're going to arrest him? Big Lyle Britten? I'd love to know how you managed **that.**
> Parnell: Well, Juanita, I am not a **good** man, but I have my little ways. [B.B.M.Ch.: 18]

As we can see, the chain of questions forming the initiating move of the exchange focuses on the explication of some situational problem, which is marked by the anaphoric deixis 'that': "They're going to arrest him? Big Lyle Britten? I'd love to know how you managed **that**." The

interlocutor interprets the communicative situation quite differently. He does not think that Big Lyle Britten is a person who is worth attention. That is why, instead of giving the required information, he changes the communicative focus from Big Lyle Britten to his own personality – considering himself a man who has been able to fulfil a complex and responsible task. Evidently, by uttering the statement "I am not a **good** man", he does not want to express self-criticism at all. On the contrary, he intends to produce quite the opposite effect and goes on to praise himself: "but I have my little ways." The conjunction *but* expresses a logically reverse, opposite idea. By means of it the illocutionary force of self-appraisal is stressed. Apparently, the deviation of the communicative focus occurs spontaneously, as a natural development of conversation which, anyhow, brings about distortion in the process of regular utterance linkage.

As we can see in the following example, in some cases the deviation of the communicative focus is carried out indirectly:

> (9) Ginger: I knowed it, should have got rid on him for sure, Spens.
> Spens: We have got rid on him, haven't we?
> Ginger: You done it against me, Spens. To hinder all on us, and to hinder me...
> Spens: Ballocks!
> Ginger: To spite the workers, Spens, you done it. Undo your bloody labour.
> Spens: Superstitious bastard, Ginger. I know you. [R.N.C.: 112]

In this exchange the topic of conversation concerns a non-participant of the communicative situation who is disfavoured by both the speakers. The speaker advises his interlocutor, who is his boss, to get rid of the non-participant, since the latter causes serious discomfort, trouble and hinders their work. Spens, who has already settled a score with that person, wants to win his interlocutor's appraisal and make him co-partner of his crime. He forms a disjunctive question, where the communicative focus changes from the first person singular **I** to first person plural **we,** which, as we know, includes both the speaker and the interlocutor and, perhaps, the other workers as well: "**We** have got rid on him, haven't we?"

Interpreting this change of focus as a charge, or imputation of a crime,

the speaker begins to set himself right with the speaker: "**You** done it against me, Spens." In his statement the deictic pronouns '**you – me – us**' stand in opposition, implying the speaker's denial of his possible participation in the action which he condemns. Since the participants have opposing attitudes to the situation, their viewpoints clash, resulting in conflict. The responding moves of the interlocutor come to prove that the speaker's back-accusation has made him angry. Spens shows his resentment with the help of expressive speech acts which impart his negative estimation: "Ballocks!", "Superstitious bastard, Ginger. I know you." As we can see, the communicative focus of the interaction changes, which brings about the breaking of relevance ties with consecutive sequential inconsistency. The faulty chaining of the moves is the result of certain psychological factors that emerge in the process of communication, developing a confrontational type of verbal behaviour and hindering the consistent sequence of utterances. Hence, in this case we have an incompatible type of a confrontational piece of discourse.

3. Concluding remarks

Looking at interaction as a cognitive process – verbal behaviour governed by special rules – its functioning should be assessed as felicitous or infelicitous proceeding from the factor of sequential consistency of utterances. This means that communicative success obviously manifests itself in the links that are established between the consecutive moves. Hence, being intertwined by threefold links, these moves form a holistic communicative unity, a tied stretch of talk, often referred to as 'exchange' or 'adjacency pair'. In their turn, Communicative Harmony Determinants (Cohesion, Coherence and Relevance) provide the correlative unification of the interlocutors' ideas and contribute to the successful development of the communicative process, serving for the expected mental, verbal and socio-psychological unity. We can claim that the linkage of the moves provided by the Communicative Harmony Determinants provides a felicitous course of communication – consistent interconnection of successive utterances carried out on the locutionary, illocutionary, perlocutionary as well as interactional levels of the speech act.

My analysis is an attempt to show that as a result of violation of the ties providing a compatible succession of utterances (namely, that of relevance as is the case), there appears sequential incompatibility in the process of interaction, which we call distortion of sequential consistency. These inconsistencies which may be placed both in the speaker's and in the interlocutor's speech domains, appear during the joint development of verbal interaction, irrespective of the type of verbal behaviour – co-operative or contradictory. Sequential inconsistencies are often dependent on the socio-psychological factor and result from a certain critical evaluation of the partner or the communicative situation – e.g. negative predisposition to the interlocutor's personality, his/her behaviour, hidden motivation to oppose somebody or something, or to contradict. Since communication tresspasses the 'linguistic borderline' and includes intellectual and psychological innate factors, communicative failure is not always displayed explicitly with the help of external language means in speech. As it is, speakers do not usually 'detect' any violations – sequential inconsistencies in the course of interaction, nor do they ask for repair. Thus, often covert, veiled in character, sequential inconsistencies may arise from the 'malfunctioning' of one of the circles of the cognitive process and affect the natural development of interaction negatively, hindering the accomplishment of the communicative goal.

Communicative units that contain distortion of sequential inconsistency are deemed to be incompatible pieces of discourse as opposed to compatible ones, in which Communicative Harmony Determinants function flawlessly, contributing to the successful accomplishment of the communicative goal.

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