

Lesson 12

Reading Material

I

Introduction: linguistic forms and functions

I.1 The functions of language

The analysis of **discourse** is, necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affairs. While some linguists may concentrate on determining the formal properties of a language, the discourse analyst is committed to an investigation of what that language is used for. While the formal approach has a long tradition, manifested in innumerable volumes of grammar, the functional approach is less well documented. Attempts to provide even a general set of labels for the principal functions of language have resulted in vague, and often confusing, terminology. We will adopt only two terms to describe the major functions of language and emphasise that this division is an analytic convenience. It would be unlikely that, on any occasion, a natural language utterance would be used to fulfil only one function, to the total exclusion of the other. That function which language serves in the expression of 'content' we will describe as **transactional**, and that function involved in expressing social relations and personal attitudes we will describe as **interactional**. Our distinction, 'transactional / interactional', stands in general correspondence to the functional dichotomies – 'representative / expressive', found in Bühler (1934), 'referential / emotive' (Jakobson, 1960), 'ideational / interpersonal' (Halliday, 1970b) and 'descriptive / social-expressive' (Lyons, 1977).

I.1.1 *The transactional view*

Linguists and linguistic philosophers tend to adopt a limited approach to the functions of language in society. While they

frequently acknowledge that language may be used to perform many communicative functions, they nonetheless make the general assumption that the most important function is the communication of information. Thus Lyons (1977: 32) observes that the notion of communication is readily used 'of feelings, moods and attitudes' but suggests that he will be primarily interested in 'the intentional transmission of factual, or propositional, information'. Similarly Bennett (1976: 5) remarks 'it seems likely that communication is primarily a matter of a speaker's seeking either to inform a hearer of something or to enjoin some action upon him'.

The value of the use of language to transmit information is well embedded in our cultural mythology. We all believe that it is the faculty of language which has enabled the human race to develop diverse cultures, each with its distinctive social customs, religious observances, laws, oral traditions, patterns of trading, and so on. We all believe, moreover, that it is the acquisition of written language which has permitted the development within some of these cultures of philosophy, science and literature (see Goody, 1977). We all believe that this development is made possible by the ability to transfer information through the use of language, which enables man to utilise the knowledge of his forebears, and the knowledge of other men in other cultures.

We shall call the language which is used to convey 'factual or propositional information' *primarily transactional language*. In primarily transactional language we assume that what the speaker (or writer) has primarily in mind is the efficient transference of information. Language used in such a situation is primarily 'message oriented'. It is important that the recipient gets the informative detail correct. Thus if a policeman gives directions to a traveller, a doctor tells a nurse how to administer medicine to a patient, a householder puts in an insurance claim, a shop assistant explains the relative merits of two types of knitting wool, or a scientist describes an experiment, in each case it matters that the speaker should make what he says (or writes) clear. There will be unfortunate (even disastrous) consequences in the real world if the message is not properly understood by the recipient.

1.1.2 *The interactional view*

Whereas linguists, philosophers of language and psycho-

linguists have, in general, paid particular attention to the use of language for the transmission of 'factual or propositional information', sociologists and sociolinguists have been particularly concerned with the use of language to establish and maintain social relationships. In sociological and anthropological literature the *phatic* use of language has been frequently commented on – particularly the conventional use of language to open talk-exchanges and to close them. Conversational analysts have been particularly concerned with the use of language to negotiate role-relationships, peer-solidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation, the saving of face of both speaker and hearer (cf. Labov, 1972a; Brown and Levinson, 1978; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Lakoff, 1973). It is clearly the case that a great deal of everyday human interaction is characterised by the primarily interpersonal rather than the primarily transactional use of language. When two strangers are standing shivering at a bus-stop in an icy wind and one turns to the other and says 'My goodness, it's cold', it is difficult to suppose that the primary intention of the speaker is to convey information. It seems much more reasonable to suggest that the speaker is indicating a readiness to be friendly and to talk. Indeed a great deal of ordinary everyday conversation appears to consist of one individual commenting on something which is present to both him and his listener. The weather is of course the most quoted example of this in British English. However a great deal of casual conversation contains phrases and echoes of phrases which appear more to be intended as contributions to a conversation than to be taken as instances of information-giving. Thus a woman on a bus describing the way a mutual friend has been behaving, getting out of bed too soon after an operation, concludes her turn in the conversation by saying:

Aye, she's an awfy woman. (awfy = Sc awful)

This might be taken as an informative summary. Her neighbour then says reflectively (having been supportively uttering *aye*, *aye* throughout the first speaker's turn):

Aye, she's an awfy woman.

Pirsig (1976: 313) remarks of such a conversation: 'the conversation's pace intrigues me. It isn't intended to go anywhere, just fill

the time of day . . . on and on and on with no point or purpose other than to fill the time, like the rocking of a chair.'

What seems to be primarily at issue here is the sharing of a common point of view. Brown & Levinson point out the importance for social relationships of establishing common ground and agreeing on points of view, and illustrate the lengths to which speakers in different cultures will go to maintain an appearance of agreement, and they remark 'agreement may also be stressed by *repeating* part or all of what the preceding speaker has said' (1978: 117).

Whereas, as we shall note, written language is, in general, used for primarily transactional purposes, it is possible to find written genres whose purpose is not primarily to inform but to maintain social relationships – 'thank you' letters, love letters, games of consequences, etc.

1.2 Spoken and written language

1.2.1 *Manner of production*

From the point of view of production, it is clear that spoken and written language make somewhat different demands on language-producers. The speaker has available to him the full range of 'voice quality' effects (as well as facial expression, postural and gestural systems). Armed with these he can always override the effect of the words he speaks. Thus the speaker who says 'I'd really like to', leaning forward, smiling, with a 'warm, breathy' voice quality, is much more likely to be interpreted as meaning what he says, than another speaker uttering the same words, leaning away, brow puckered, with a 'sneering, nasal' voice quality. These paralinguistic cues are denied to the writer. We shall generally ignore paralinguistic features in spoken language in this book since the data we shall quote from is spoken by co-operative adults who are not exploiting paralinguistic resources against the verbal meanings of their utterances but are, rather, using them to reinforce the meaning.

Not only is the speaker controlling the production of communicative systems which are different from those controlled by the writer, he is also processing that production under circumstances which are considerably more demanding. The speaker must monitor what it is that he has just said, and determine whether it