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Epilogue: Language at the Heart of Social Psychology

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*M*ore and more social psychologists are recognizing just how important language and communication are in people's social lives and inner worlds. The papers in this volume represent a major step in codifying the state of the art of social psychology's approaches to language and communication, and a collective recognition of language's subtleties and complexities, its automatic and sometimes irresistible influences, and its power as an indicator of people's emotional and social lives. The collection merits serious attention, and ought to pave the way for yet more nuanced attention to the linguistic and communicative settings in which so much of life in the social world occurs.

So where has language been in social psychology? Why have the kinds of phenomena investigated here not been as central to the field as these papers powerfully demonstrate they should be? Part of the story is not particular to social psychologists; psychologists of many stripes have tended to ignore the language in which they do their business. Throughout most of psychology, language is invisible. If it is thought about at all – and it usually is not – it is seen as the medium in which psychological phenomena are enacted or represented, but it is of little interest in its own right, either as a predictor or as a measure. So memory psychologists have for years carried out studies of people's memory for verbal materials (lists of words, stories, sentences), but they have often assumed that what they are getting at is pure memory, rather than something enacted in and affected by the linguistic content. Researchers of mental representation and categorization, judgment and decision making, and even visual and auditory perception have used words and stories as primary stimuli, but the logic of their argumentation is about domains other than the linguistic content or structure. Psychotherapy researchers examine interactive process in therapeutic dyads by watching videotapes and coding linguistic transcripts, but again the theorizing ends up being about everything but the language. And of course social psychologists have a fine tradition of writing fictional stories to set up imaginary situations for their experimental participants, of using verbal labels as proxies in their studies of person perception, and

examining various psychological consequences of dyadic and group interaction. But, with a few notable exceptions (various authors in this volume, and see Krauss & Fussell, 1996), the level of theorizing tends to render the language invisible.

I suspect the tendency for the medium of communication to be invisible is deeply ingrained in us as social actors. It makes sense for us to focus on each others' intentions, on the content of what is being communicated, rather than on the vehicle. Perhaps it should not be surprising that psychologists have been naïve about language and interactivity; almost everyone is.

Apart from the invisibility of the medium, an additional set of impediments has worked against psychologists' embracing the study of language as part of what we do, and these have come from the field of linguistics. In general, academic linguists look at languages not from the perspective of the individual language user, as a psychologist might, but as structures independent of the individual: phonological forms, grammatical structures, semantic rules. The history of this focus is longstanding; it is clearly visible in Chomsky's mid-20th-century approaches, but also in earlier Saussurian and even ancient Greek approaches (although there the picture is more muddied). Linguists who study the structures and functions of languages have started with the assumption that mental processes – the sorts of things that psychologists care about – simply act upon those existing structures, and so it is legitimate to study the structures independent of the processes. Separating process and structure like this makes for clear disciplinary boundaries, but it also makes for psychologists who, in attending to process, assume that the details of the structure do not matter so much.

Another part of the story has to do with the extreme technical nature of modern work in the field of linguistics. Without substantial background and training, it is virtually impossible for a non-expert to understand what syntacticians or phonologists today are talking about. Of course, the fact that linguistic phenomena turn out to be complex cannot be blamed on the linguists who uncover the complexity (although perhaps we can fault some linguists for aggressively obscure writing). Perhaps this reflects a general cultural lack of value for linguistics literacy, parallel to our various other quantitative, historical, and literary illiteracies. But I believe that part of many social psychologists' distress upon being exposed to linguistic theory is not just laziness or unwillingness to deal with the complexity. I believe it is also a reaction to the central starting assumption of Chomskyan (and in its own way Saussurian) linguistics that linguistic competence is what centrally needs to be modeled, and that mere performance variation is far less interesting.

To put it more directly, I believe that dominant trends of modern linguistics assume that language is at its core a purely cognitive phenomenon that is not affected in interesting ways by the social world. To the extent that the social world intrudes, this belongs in the murky realm of pragmatics, or worse yet in the domains of mere performance or error; or it belongs in cultural-level or historical-level discussions about cross-cultural contact, minority linguistic communities, and language change over time. The most highly prestigious and "rigorous" work in linguistics has focused on syntactic, lexical, and phonological phenomena, and it has achieved its main inroad into psychology in the subfield of cognitive psychology. Within the field of linguistics, the pragmatic (and perhaps semantic) phenomena

that are so clearly social are less well studied and less prestigious. They are also complex and situation-bound. So most social psychologists have never heard of most linguists who think about pragmatics; for them, linguistics means grammars and formal structures and logic, and phenomena that just are not social.

As the papers in this volume attest, when social psychologists examine language, they do not necessarily do it in ways that connect with modern mainstream linguistics. Three examples make the point. Pennebaker and colleagues' LIWC program counts words and attends to grammatical category membership of those words, but the work is not based on linguistic analyses beyond parts of speech and verb tense, and it does not claim to be other than linguistically atheoretical. Semin and Fiedler's notion of linguistic abstraction in intergroup bias focuses on lexical and syntactic features of sentences, but those features are empirically derived in Semin and Fiedler's own work, rather than coming from widely-agreed-upon distinctions made by linguists. Wänke's discussion of question wording and question ordering effects relies on intuitions from the field of pragmatics made not by a linguist but by the philosopher of language, Grice, from whom linguists who study pragmatics also draw. My point is not that any of these social psychological approaches is unsophisticated or that they fail to achieve their purposes; it is just that the work proceeds independently of what is going on in the mainstream of linguistics today.

Linguistics for Social Psychologists

What many social psychologists may not realize is that there is an interdisciplinary world of study that has examined social phenomena in language for some time, and that there is a wealth of literature documenting interactive and discourse-level phenomena that social psychologists are likely to find fascinating and informative. It is not quite right to call this a single field, as it involves scholars with vastly different methods and agendas who only sometimes meet up with each other and at other times play roles more central to their home disciplines. And there is no single defining place where scholars of this sort regularly meet. But one can find them at interdisciplinary annual meetings of groups like the International Pragmatics Association or the Society for Text and Discourse; at meetings on linguistic anthropology; at sociology meetings on Conversational Analysis and Ethnomethodology; at philosophy meetings that focus on the pragmatics of language; and at technology-focused meetings on computational linguistics, computer-supported cooperative work, and human–computer interaction that focus on interactive dialogue and the mental models that people must have of their conversational partners. A few social psychologists – including some who have contributed to this volume – occasionally attend these sorts of meetings, and read and submit papers to the corresponding journals.

But there is room for many more. The one thing that it takes to join in and benefit from conversation with these other sorts of scholars is a willingness to look at phenomena independently of one's own research methods – in fact, to accept the possibility of learning from a scholar whose methods one finds dubious or borderline repellant. This is no mean feat, and not everyone has what it takes to do

it. However, the potential benefits are enormous, and the potential for broadening the impact of social psychology in these other worlds is also enormous.

Let me just give just one example to make this concrete. Consider the work of noted applied linguist Charles Goodwin, who has documented an extraordinary array of interactive conversational phenomena, and how people coordinate in handing over the floor via gaze and gesture. His methods differ substantially from what experimental social psychologists would do in the same arena; the work rigorously and carefully deconstructs case studies of brief audio and video clips of interaction. But through this kind of close analysis, he is able to convincingly illuminate the millisecond-level reactivity that, for example, teams of surgeons engage in as they coordinate their words, slices, and retractions during major surgery. The work should be highly suggestive for social psychologists concerned with how both self- and other-monitoring work in concrete situations, or for psychologists who want to understand gestural and gaze cues. One could imagine showing his video clips in an introductory social psychology class to concretely demonstrate millisecond-level reactivity. One could also imagine the interesting conversations one might have with Chuck about how power dynamics or implicit prejudice or extraversion might predict the reactivity he measures. And one might imagine designing larger scale experiments that test the pervasiveness as well as the individual and cultural variability of the phenomena he so rigorously describes.

The point is that one could imagine another collection of papers, parallel and complementary to this one, by linguists, anthropologists, dialogue psychologists, conversation analysts, etc., focusing upon how their work impinges upon and makes claims relevant to social psychology. That would, of course, be a different enterprise than the current volume engages in, and it would raise a new set of questions about the extent to which social psychologists can engage in dialogue with scholars with different methodological commitments. As I see it, social psychology has much to offer in the way of experimental precision and a process-driven approach that seeks to ground itself in psychological theory. Social psychology also has much to learn from approaches that explicitly honor, in their choice of methods, the fact that social life is often more complex than a two-by-two experiment can capture.

A MORE DEEPLY DIALECTICAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

Fiedler's introduction to this volume nicely lays out the territory with its review of effects of wording and presupposition, and how they are simultaneously both the results and the determinants of various social psychological processes. This dialectical approach strikes me as important and absolutely right. But I would argue that the extent of the dialectic between the linguistic and the social is even greater than one might suppose based on the review, or indeed based on many of the chapters in this volume.

In particular, many of the approaches presented here focus on the words and sentences themselves, and on the mental processes of the individuals who produce or interpret those words and sentences. These approaches embody what Clark and

various colleagues (e.g., Clark, 1996; Clark & Krych, 2004, Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986; Schober & Clark, 1989) have called a *unilateral* or *autonomous* view of language use. But words and sentences are only attempts at meaning, rather than guarantees of success: speakers and writers produce them in the hope that they will be understood and be persuasive, but listeners and readers may or may not understand or be persuaded as intended. Listeners' and readers' uptake of the words and sentences will not always be the same as what the speakers and writers intended. And in an interactive situation, listeners' reactivity to what speakers are producing can actually mold what speakers do; speakers can alter their words on a moment-by-moment basis as evidence accumulates of their addressee's comprehension, incomprehension, approval, or distress.

Thinking about how uptake affects messages and how meaning is not inherent in the words themselves leads to a more extreme dialectic between the linguistic and the social: a *bilateral* (rather than unilateral) and *collaborative* (rather than autonomous) view of the nature of social cognition and interaction. Given psychology's focus on individual minds, it is not surprising that our views have tended toward the unilateral. But if we take the thrust of the work in this book seriously, as well as work in related fields, we may be driven to a yet more complex view that is also more likely to be correct.

I suspect that a major reason why few social psychologists have taken a more bilateral approach is because of our methodological commitment to experimental manipulation, which makes it hard to look at this sort of thing. If two agents are free to mutually influence each other without the experimenter's control, understanding the independent influence of experimental factors becomes difficult. The solution that many social psychologists rely on – using experimental confederates – handles part of the control problem (although only part, as confederates can only be controlled within limits), but it does not allow for authentic bilateral mutual influence. Our scientific need to control situations makes it uncomfortable to allow more than one agent in an experiment to do what they please.

I would argue that another reason why the social psychologists' approach tends to be more unilateral than bilateral stems, somewhat ironically, from our legitimate interest in generalizability. By using group averages as the proxy for what the individual does, our intention is to go beyond theoretically uninteresting random variability and to see more general facts about human behavior and mental process. But in so doing, we run the risk of ignoring subtler forms of inter-individual variability and influenceability that may, in the long run, prove to be the more interesting story. Certainly the generality of stories about subtler interactive phenomena from fields that do close case-level analyses of details of interaction (e.g., ethnomethodology, linguistic anthropology) needs to be questioned, and social psychology has important tools for doing this. But the group averaging that social psychologists do can make these phenomena invisible.

A fully social psychology that includes language and communicative phenomena in it will have to be able to examine how the individual and the collective work together in individual processing, how ongoing moment-by-moment input of others in the interpersonal field can affect the moment-by-moment processes of the individual. Borrowing from related debates on the psychology of dialogue from

psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology (see, e.g., Pickering & Garrod, 2004; Schober & Brennan, 2003), we will need to understand other issues better, for example the extent to which fast automatic processes can be externally controlled by other social agents, or the extent to which surface alignments of language or behavior reflect conceptual alignment.

One final point: I propose that moving toward this more dialectical view will require us to think about individual differences in social processes in a way that social psychologists have often resisted, because the degree of influence is likely to be affected by a person's interpersonal sensitivity or sociotropy (or, the flip side, their egocentrism or obliviousness). Our theorizing about interpersonal sensitivity and ability is probably less highly differentiated than it will need to be; for example, the capacity or desire to demonstrate emotional empathy is probably quite different from conceptual or spatial perspective-taking ability (see, e.g., Davis, 2005, and other papers in Malle & Hodges, 2005; Schober & Brennan, 2003), and different abilities may be differently affected by different degrees of overload.

Obviously, thinking and theorizing in these directions will be challenging and it will not be to the taste of, nor will it satisfy the agendas of, all social psychologists. I believe that moving at least a few steps in this direction is the inescapable conclusion of taking language and communication seriously in social psychology. The papers in this volume open doors for the field that I hope many of us will step through.

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