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A LINGUISTIC VIEW OF HABERMAS' THEORY
OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Habermas' view of language has been widely discussed in Europe and, to some extent, by rhetoricians and philosophers in the United States. Here we will present the linguistic point of view.

Habermas' theory is heavily influenced by concepts taken from hermeneutics and Habermas' own sociological views. For instance, Habermas uses his concept of "systematic distortion" (i.e. ideological distortion in a specific sense) and introduces it into the theory of communicative competence.

Habermas calls his view of language a "theory of communicative competence"; but even though he derives "competence" from Chomsky's "linguistic competence," the former's concept of competence is not to be understood entirely in the sense of transformational grammar.

In the theory of communicative competence, Habermas operates with the concept of a pragmatic truth—the "consensus theory of truth," as he calls it—and what he calls "pragmatic universals." He outlines the ideal speech situation which is the one to bring about "true" consensus and which is free of external and internal coercion. An ideal speech situation is characterized, among other things, by the fact that the "roles" of the speakers are interchangeable, that there is no systematic distortion, and so on.

Even from those few remarks, it becomes clear that Habermas is not an empiricist, neither from the linguistic nor from the sociological standpoint; and this is where part of the weakness of the entire theory stems from and where linguistic criticism can start.

† † †

DISCUSSION

Habermas' theory of communicative competence (1971: 101-141) has been widely discussed in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the United States. A philosopher's critique of the theory of communicative competence unfolds in Bar-Hillel (1973:1-11). Here we will present the linguistic point of view.

Habermas begins by using the now famous discrimination between linguistic competence and linguistic performance. Already, linguistic criticism could be a propos, because psycholinguistic data have not wholly supported the differentiation between (innate) competence and performance (compare e.g. Jerome Bruner's address to the 21st International Congress of Psychology, Paris). Already a casual inspection of the speech behavior of children reveals that they are not that linguistically competent. (This is exemplified nicely by a little "school daze" joke—Note left on the teacher's desk: "Dear Teacher: I have written 'I have gone' a hundred times, as you have told me. So now I have went home.") But since the competence-performance problem is the responsibility of the linguist or psycholinguist, one should not blame the sociologist Habermas for not having solved it.

Habermas then introduces his own idea that the competence-performance distinction has to be enlarged by the concept that the general structures of possible speech situations can themselves be brought about by linguistic acts. Those structures are said neither to belong to the extralinguistic conditions under which an utterance is uttered nor to be identical with the linguistic entities that are produced by means of linguistic competence. Their purpose is the pragmatic embedding of a speech or speech act (1971:101).

It is obvious that Habermas, thus, aims either at the philosophical distinction between utterance and sentence or at the linguistic distinction between token sentence and type sentence or at some other linguistic or philosophical distinction between the empirical and the theoretical level (e.g., word vs. lexeme, etc.). Habermas resorts to the utterance-sentence distinction and creates some confusion by calling utterances "situated sentences" and by speaking of sentences as parts of speech acts, i.e. sentences as parts of specific kinds of utterances. Although the distinction utterance-sentence has so far proven quite satisfactory, Habermas feels himself compelled to introduce a four-fold distinction: 1) An utterance is concrete, if it is uttered in a certain empirical situation; its meaning is determined also by contingent factors —by the personalities of the speaker and the listener and by the roles they play in the society (1971:106-107). A linguist might say that at stage one connotation is important. According to Habermas, this concrete utterance is the subject matter of what he calls empirical pragmatics, that is, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics (1971:108). The empirically minded linguist will, nevertheless, ask: What about, for example, statistical semantics, articulatory and acoustic phonetics, lexicography, .. .? 2) If we abstract from the variable elements of a concrete utterance, then we obtain the elementary utterance, which is, according to Habermas, the pragmatic unit of speech (1971:107); it is obviously identical with a speech act (1971:104). The elementary utterance is the subject matter of a discipline Habermas wishes to introduce and which he

calls "universal pragmatics" ("Universalpragmatik"; 1971: 108) or "theory of communicative competence." 3) In a second step we abstract from the performance and, thus, retain the unit of linguistics, the elementary sentence (1971: 107-108). 4) By a final step of abstraction, where we do away with the performative and other pragmatic linguistic elements of stage three, we obtain another elementary unit: the propositional sentence or the elementary proposition ("elementare Aussage"; 1971:107). The elementary proposition is used—according to Habermas—to reproduce states of affairs ("Sachverhalte"; 1971:107); and according to him, it is predicate logic that deals with the elementary proposition. It is to be noted that we use "proposition" here as translation for "Aussage," not to be confused with the proposition as the platonistic meaning of a sentence.

There are various linguistic questions connected with those three abstractions. Since Habermas does not, on the one hand, tell us what those variable elements of stage one are that are to be removed by abstraction in order to produce the elementary utterance, or, on the other hand, why the elementary utterances are still utterances, i.e. something that falls in the category of performance—we plainly do not know what the elementary utterance is. Is it speech without the "ahs" and "ums," without gestures, without personal style and personal mannerisms? Or is the third stage, won by abstraction from stage two, purely linguistic? If we interpret Habermas here, we have to add that the elementary sentence is un-uttered by any empirical speaker. It seems to me that Habermas takes here the concepts of generative grammar all too seriously (1971:107). The idea of restricting linguistics to the study of elementary sentences—and elementary sentences only—is untenable, even if we do not consider a linguistics of the Firthian type where, for example, meaning is the whole complex of functions a linguistic form may have. If we stick to Habermas' opinion on the subject matter of linguistics, then linguistics never deals with empirical facts, but with something that is already the result of a two-step abstraction. It is, however, linguistics, besides others, which—starting with empirical discovery procedures—performs the abstraction from the concrete utterance to more theoretical concepts like the lexeme, the type word, the moneme, or, expressed more generally, to the level of the *langue* (de Saussure). This is the basis of structuralistic linguistics and of linguistics as an empirical science as well. If we remove the empirical basis of linguistics by removing the concrete and the elementary utterance (the speech act), then linguistics severs its connections with the empirical languages.

Stage two is characterized by the fact that so-called pragmatic universals become visible; Habermas calls them "pragmatic universals" because they can be correlated with universal structures of a speech situation, i.e., the structure that each speaker requires a listener (1971:109). Looked at closely, it seems that the pragmatic universals are of a similar nature as the lexemes because Habermas simply presents them as a list of words and refuses to assign them to a

meta-language (1971:109). Under those circumstances, it seems quite unnecessary to introduce three levels of abstraction and a specific science, called "universal pragmatics" or "theory of communicative competence."

Let us now have a linguistic look at the speech act (the elementary unit of speech = the elementary utterance) as conceived by Habermas. According to Habermas—who tries to resort here to Austin and Searle—a speech act is always composed of two "sentences" (we should better say: linguistic elements, parts, etc.)—a performative "sentence" and a propositional "sentence." We have to add here that Habermas' pragmatic universals can also be non-performative (i.e., deichtic; 1971:109). There is one exception to the division performative "sentence"-propositional "sentence": institutionalized speech acts do not have to contain a propositional "sentence" ("I thank you" / "I curse you"—Habermas' examples; 1971: 113). Here a strong idealization occurs because Habermas assumes that all sentences, without exception, contain a performative element, either empirically, or (still empirically hypothetical) in a deep structure. If we take the standpoint that linguistics is an empirical science, then the empirical absence of something—e.g., the absence of "I know" from "(that) the flower is red"—does not imply that we can simply say: if it is not here, it is in the deep structure. By the way, a problem of the same order arises when Habermas says that institutionalized speech acts are dependent upon other speech acts, which, as a rule, are not verbalized (1971:113). This is a serious empirical problem that, *mutatis mutandis,* also plagues other sciences: Because the theory demands that there is an empirical entity (e.g., a luminiferous ether), one assumes it has to be someplace; and in linguistics, the most convenient "someplace" is the deep structure.

A speech act thus divided in two parts can be further characterized by the fact that the propositional content of the propositional "sentence" stays the same when, for example, questions are transformed into commands and commands into confessions (1971:106). It is not entirely clear what Habermas means by "propositional content," but it seems that the propositional content is some platonistic or idealistic meaning. If so, such a concept must be refused in empirical linguistics where one substitutes either the empirical descriptive meaning for it or the meaning as used in the language. A further empirical argument—and this argument also concerns a good deal of today's linguistics—starts with the observation that, if nothing else changes when we "transform" (e.g., questions into commands), at least the syntactic structure of the propositional "sentence" changes ("Are you leaving?"; "Leave!"; "I confess that I am leaving"; or better, perhaps: "I confess that I left."). One could now put forth a hypothesis: 1) The syntactic change indicates a change in meaning, a view supported by certain findings in historical linguistics. This reverses, of course, the relationship between syntax and semantics as it is usually conceived, or it gives at least syntax a semantic aspect; 2) We could draw the conclusion that the two utterances—"The water is running" and "I believe the

water is running"—do not share a common "element" of meaning, namely, the meaning of "the water is running," but that they are two linguistic entities with two different semantic structures. Wittgenstein has argued that in the examples, "I expect he is coming" and "He is coming," "he is coming" has in both instances the same meaning because our hopes can be fulfilled (1953:130^e, § 444). But what about hopes that can never be fulfilled because they belong to some never-never land? And what about the examples, "I dreamt that the cows ate square roots" and "The cows ate square roots," where the latter is in conflict with current (English) language use and thus meaningless in language-immanent semantics as well as in empirical. One could imagine that the first case—"(that) the cows ate square roots"—has some meaning, although no empirical meaning. It is obvious that a meaningful and a meaningless sentence or part of a sentence cannot have the same meaning. It would be preferable to say, first, that in the case of the example given by Wittgenstein, the sameness of meaning is accidental or fictitious as long as we are on the language-immanent level and, second, that we have to stress that such questions cannot be solved solely by a semantics where meaning appears as a language-immanent use of the language; we also have to apply an empirical descriptive semantics.

Despite the recent criticism that has been heaped upon interpretative semantics, it seems that a refined interpretative semantics (minus the mentalism à la Katz) or a structural semantics could deal with those problems most adequately. (One should not forget that a good deal of computer semantics is interpretative; compare, for example, Wilks, 1972, and Minsky, 1968.) On a language-immanent level, the ontological abyss between intension and extension (one of the characteristics of an empirical descriptive semantics—or, in Habermas' terms, the distinction between the performative "sentence" and the propositional "sentence") would be diminished or take another shape. For example, the difference between "I see that those flowers are red" and "I believe that those flowers are red" would not lie in the fact that the first sentence is intentional and the second assertive, but in the fact that "see" and "believe" associate—according to present (English, German, . . .) language-use with different sets of words.

Those considerations are essential for Habermas' theory of communicative competence also for another reason: He uses a consensus theory of truth rather than a correspondence theory, an issue which is a philosophical one and which we are, therefore, not going to discuss here.

The last problem we are going to deal with is the problem of Habermas' ideal speech situation. He states the following: 1) The significance of a speech act lies in the fact that two people act in agreement or communicate about something; 2) Communication means the bringing about of true consensus. For Habermas' concept of true consensus, we refer to Habermas' writings themselves, since true consensus is not a linguistic problem; 3) True consensus can be dis-

criminated from false consensus only with reference to an ideal or idealized speech situation, i.e., agreement is to be reached under ideal conditions which Habermas says are counterfactual (1971:136). The serious empirical linguist begins to wonder that perhaps a counterfactual condition of an empirical speech act is a *contradictio in adiecto*. It's as if a physicist would say: Perform this mechanical experiment in the open air under the (counterfactual) condition that there is no air friction. Habermas justifies the idealization of a speech act and its ideal preconditions by saying that this is an anticipation ("Vorgriff"; 1971:136 ff.); this reminds us of hermeneutic philosophy. In hermeneutic philosophy, however, one has to justify one's anticipations by means of that which follows, be that which follows the interpretation of a given text or a series of actions or speech acts. But since the anticipation here is counterfactual, it can never be justified, and is, therefore, not even an heuristic device.

A speech situation is ideal if it is neither hampered by external, extra-linguistic circumstances (e.g., political ones), or by internal, linguistic circumstances; the latter includes the absence of what Habermas calls "systematic distortion" ("systematische Verzerrung"; 1971:137). According to Habermas, a systematic distortion does not imply that one is deceived by means of language, but that language in itself—for example, ideological language—is deceptive. This presupposes that, in the case of political, ideological language as a medium of power and social control, its ideological character is not revealed by those in power (1970:287). If we read in a philosophical dictionary that socialist democracy originates and develops together with the working class' rise to political power and with the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, then we know that this must be a dictionary compiled by a Marxist (Klaus and Buhr, 1964:102b). But is this explication of "democracy" really distorted and—if it is distorted—distorted in comparison to what? A "western" explication of "democracy"? But "democracy," as the word already implies, practically always justifies power and is, thus, always ideological. Therefore, from a linguist's standpoint, we could say, with like credence, that a "western" explication of democracy is systematically distorted compared to a Marxist one, if—and only if—the Marxist and the "western" use of language have been firmly established and the denotations have been agreed upon. The linguist can do nothing else but state a change of meaning in case the "western" and the "Marxist" basic languages are essentially the same, as is the case in East and West Germany. "Democracy" in different languages can be compared only with great difficulty. Otherwise, the linguist has to resort to the venerable but false notion that some speech shows "true" meanings, whereas other forms of speech do not. Language itself has to be considered as a neutral vehicle, quite innocent of all the crimes it has been blamed for, including ideological distortion.

Essentially, Habermas argues that the structure of communication itself produces no coercion when—and only

when—for all communicators there is a symmetrical distribution of chances to select speech acts and to perform them. Then, the roles played by the participants in a dialogue can be exchanged, and the communicators will be in a state of equality with respect to the performing of roles in a dialogue (1971:137). If this is an idealization, it does not add anything to the improvement of our speech acts since it is said to be counterfactual. And if we remove the counterfactuality of this statement and apply it to empirical speech situations, we will see that—in most instances—it is plainly false. Language conceived in such a way would be partly reduced to the symmetrical exchange of pleasantries or of informations about well established facts, where the persuasive power of speech plays no role; in general rhetoric as the art of persuasion would have to disappear. Another possibility is what we might call a "theorizing" dialogue, i.e., a dialogue where people try to reason together and where the symmetrical distribution of chances to select and perform speech acts is preserved. Such a dialogue would be evenly flowing and would appear as if staged. If we try to give an example of such a dialogue, we might think of the staged dialogues of Plato or of Galilei's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. But a closer look at, for example, the Platonic *Cratylus* reveals that Cratylus' contributions to the dialogue are often reduced to "Yes"; "No; I do not"; "Certainly"; "What do you mean?"; "Most assuredly"; whereas Socrates plays a dominating and domineering role. This is, of course, even more so in real life. Speech situations as conceived by Habermas would presuppose that all men are not only equal before the law and with respect to their chances in society (and even those two equalities exist empirically only in a restricted form), but that they are also equal with respect to their intellectual capabilities, their linguistic fluency, their wit, etc., and that they are all dispassionate, even apathetic. Thus, speech is almost always asymmetrical, due to the differences in the nature of men, and because of the practical demand of avoiding excessive expenses and excessive amounts of time and nerves.

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