

# On Reflexive Language and Its Manifestations in Discourse

Dr. Mihaita Horezeanu

## I. INTRODUCTION

**I**N everyday life we do not only speak a certain language to communicate our ideas, intentions, feelings, etc. but also speak about that language; and we do this for different purposes – when we want to make a comment on, express an attitude towards, criticize, etc. what we or other participants in a conversation are saying. Inevitably, we can only use language to talk about language. This brings about a shift of level from that of talking about something to that of talking about the talk itself. For the latter level the prefix meta- has been traditionally used since Alfred Tarski in the 1930s, followed by a variety of terms reflecting various linguistic theories or simply, various immediate concerns: e.g. language, discourse, communication, talk, narrative, text, grammar, etc.

Since our primary concern here is everyday conversation, we could use any of the terms referring to spoken (i.e. not written) language if we didn't have to be wary of further dangers behind inconsistent definitions or arbitrary hierarchies (for a brief review of such contrasts as metalanguage vs. metacommunication see Schiffrin 1987:303). This is why we prefer to speak of a

metapragmatic level of language or even, after Mey (1993:269) a metapragmatics of language, which, in my opinion, may resemble metalanguage or metagrammar when understood as a “mirror” enabling language/grammar to look at itself, but which, at the same time, differs from the latter in as much as it mirrors very different and specific things.

## II. METALANGUAGE VS. METAPRAGMATICS

My paper will illustrate the difference between talking about language as a system and talking about the appropriate use of language. Let us take the first.

### *Talking about language as a system*

The self-describing property or function of language forms the basis of theories about language or grammars. It provides the terminology to be expanded into an articulate form of discourse. Thus a statement like ‘Go’ is an irregular verb. is a metalinguistic one since it comments on go, which is an item in the English lexicon. That language and metalanguage are two different levels can be seen in the following contrast:

A verb is a verb. (a semantic tautology which can become relevant in various contexts) and ‘Verb’ is a noun.

In the first case verb has a metalinguistic function, in the second it is simply a language item or object language.

Similarly, the answer to a question like “What’s the capital in France?” is F since Paris is the capital (city) of France, whereas the metalinguistic item “capital” describes the form and size of a letter used at the beginning of a sentence or proper noun.

The fact that metalanguage necessarily draws its material

from language itself explains why sometimes this “mirror” can play funny tricks on us so that we cannot readily tell the real object from its reflected image (i.e. Level 1 from Level 2). To illustrate this, I have chosen a fragment from a poem by Mike Rosen which was a subject of pedagogic debate in British secondary schools in the early 1990s:

The teacher said:

A noun is a naming word.

What is the naming word in the sentence

‘He named the ship Lusitania’?

‘Named’ said George.

‘WRONG – it’s ship.’

The teacher said:

A verb is a doing word.

What is the doing word in the sentence

‘I like doing homework’?

‘Doing’ said George.

‘WRONG – it’s like.’

The teacher said:

An adjective is a describing word.

What is the describing word in the sentence

‘Describing sunsets is boring’?

‘Describing’ said George.

‘WRONG – it’s boring’.

‘I know it is’, said George.

Another case where the boundary between metalanguage and object language is blurred is provided by all those ‘rules for writing good’ that were circulated tongue-in-cheek amongst various US English departments in the 1970s as a satirical reaction to some extreme prescriptive attitudes to

language. Traditionally, grammars state rules which are then followed by examples which support the theoretical assertions. Thus the metalanguage and the object language are kept apart. In the example below, however, the rule and the illustrative sentence overlap:

\*Every pronoun agrees with their antecedent.

While the mistake is immediately obvious, simply because ‘Every pronoun agrees with its antecedent’, a layman (call him George if you will) might still not realize that the pronoun here is ‘their’ (not ‘pronoun’!) or that the antecedent is ‘pronoun’ (not ‘antecedent’!).

### *Talking about the appropriate use of language*

The metapragmatic level of language refers not to language abstracted from a context but rather to “the circumstances... that allow us to use our language or prevent us from using it” (Mey 1993:271). It captures the general conditions under which the users of a language have to work and is directed, very roughly, towards: 1) the form of talk and 2) the activity of talking itself. We shall take each in turn.

### *The form of talk*

“The question of what (a part of) discourse is intended to count as can often be an important part of a participant’s perception of what is going on in a conversation” (Brazil 1995:168). Thus nouns like story, explanation, description, etc. or equivalent verb phrases can acquire a metapragmatic function when they are used in preliminary labelling:

- e.g. a. My friend told me this amazing story the other day.
- b. Let me explain.
- c. Let me put it another way.

Now what is this metapragmatic function all about and what is the meaning conveyed in each case? A global answer can be given to the first question: the function of these labels is preparatory – the listener is warned that what follows should be responded to in its completeness; he is invited to agree to a suspension of the turn-taking machinery for a while (Levinson 1983:324), etc. This is rather about form than content. To answer the second question we have to consider each label separately. Thus in (a) we learn that we are going to listen to a story (i.e. not an explanation, or an apology, or a piece of advice), the story is amazing (the perlocutionary effect is anticipated or prompted, perhaps) and the reason why we shall or ought to find it amazing is that it is true (according to the speaker or his friend – the real source); the speaker may imply that even though he is not responsible for its truth, the story is nevertheless true because the source is his friend (expectations of positive politeness). With (b) and (c) we learn that what follows is an explanation and a paraphrase, respectively (which may be two different things – for instance, (c) may be another attempt at what (b) has already failed to do).

Another way of referring to the status of what has been said is to add a comment at the end of an utterance (retrospective labelling). This is less common than preliminary labelling, since “the giving of advance warning about how to interpret an assertion or about what the present focus of interest is assumed to be is more obviously useful than doing either of these things after the assertion has been made” (Brazil 1995:188).

e.g. I'll see you tomorrow. That's a promise.

Sometimes labelling an utterance retrospectively can be done in order to obtain a certain perlocutionary effect, as in

the following fragment from George Bush's message to Saddam, hours after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990:

e.g. "Iraq will not be permitted to annex Kuwait. And that's not a threat, that's not a boast, that's just the way it's going to be."

We can note that the speaker's first label at least (That's not a threat) is not sincere because the first utterance remains a threat even when its status is overtly denied. The speaker's subtle strategy is 1) to disguise the speech act of threatening as one of prediction (that's just the way it's going to be) since the latter (unlike pledges) excludes the speaker's commitment to carry out its content and thus it excludes the possibility of the speaker's failure; 2) the disguise is intentional and conspicuous enough so that it becomes a part of what is communicated in the utterance (we know that oracles are a thing of the past).

Another area where discourse labelling occurs extensively is that of reported speech, particularly when the indirect expression analyzes or interprets the speech event with or without overtly representing it.

e.g. 'Damn this fog!', the driver exclaimed.

The driver cursed the fog.

'Don't go there on a Sunday morning!'

He warned me not to go there on a Sunday morning.

'Hey, that's a great haircut you got!'

Tom complimented me today. (Lucy 1993:10)

### *The activity of talking*

Besides identifying types of discourse, language can be used

to talk about/refer to human language behaviour and the rules governing it. However, these rules must be kept distinct from the rules of grammar which are arbitrary or conventional. “Rather they are realizations of certain general constraints which guide us as we strive to realize our goals” (Mey 1993:278). Thus the rules and principles of how language works in conversation are reflected in the very language used by conversationalists. The purposes such meta-talk serves can be very diverse. On a more general level, however, we agree that, given the interactive nature of conversation, the metapragmatics of a language “provides a resource through which speakers display orientations and negotiate alignments” (Schiffrin 1987:304). In other words it becomes a pragmatic device. It should be noted, however, that not all pragmatic devices are metapragmatic.

Compare, for instance, the following expressions used to avoid/postpone granting a request:

Do me a favour (apologetic)

Not in a million years/Over my dead body (definite)

If wish were father to the deed

Chance would be a fine thing

Je regrette, mais... (euphemistic)

and You must be joking

I haven't heard the magic word yet (especially to children).

Only the last two are metapragmatic. In my opinion, they can be glossed as follows: the first – “since we both know that what you are asking is absurd/impossible to comply with, the only way in which I can interpret your utterance as relevant is to consider it a joke”; or, in Gricean terms, it may be an implicature stated out loud since the previous speaker (the requester) has flouted the maxim of relevance. The second – in the light of speech act theory: “For your

utterance to be felicitous and count as a request you should add the word please”.

I believe that such glosses can be indicative of the metapragmatic status of some utterances, but they rarely come up to the surface in everyday talk. Instead, we use formulaic expressions, like the ones above, which through overuse may become so highly stylized that we hardly recognize their metapragmatic function (e.g. I mean which is often used as a filler, a mark of hesitation or disfluency – prosodic cues may also help identify one usage or other). Interestingly, however, lengthy interpretations, like the two above, may be actually used in certain circumstances by skilful speakers in order to freshen up the style or enhance its effectiveness. The following example is a request refusal containing a straightforward metapragmatic conclusion.

Neighbour: Efendim, could I borrow your rope?

Hoca: Sorry, my friend, the rope is in use.

Neighbour: But I cannot see anybody using it.

Hoca: Of course not, my harem is using it.

Neighbour: Hocam, what could your harem possibly be doing with a length of rope?

Hoca: They're putting flour on it.

Neighbour: Allah! Allah! How could anybody be putting flour on a rope?

Hoca: Clearly, that's what one does when one doesn't want to let one's neighbour have it.

At a closer look, one realizes that this last line reads in fact: “that's what one says one does...” (suggested for discussion in Mey 1993:149).

In the following, I provide more examples of statements which, one way or another, allude to various constraints on language usage and behaviour.

Compare: (1) and I'm not trying to be polite.  
(2) and I'm not trying to be ironical.  
(3) and I mean it.

(1), (2) and (3) apparently contribute the same meaning, as their function is to reinforce the truthfulness of the preceding sentence. However, at a closer look, reference is made to different norms, principles or maxims: (1) politeness phenomena; (2) denial of potential implicature (by flouting the maxim of Quality); (3) the least specific of all; its function varies according to the content of the preceding sentence (e.g. You won't see another penny from me, and I mean it – here it reinforces illocutionary force).

Other common situations may include:

- denying participant status (non-participant constraints):

e.g. Don't listen to him!

Stay out of this, OK!

When I need your advice I'll ask for it!

(cf. in Romanian: Ești avocatul lui? literally "Are you his lawyer or something?" or Te-a întrebat cineva? literally "Has anyone asked you?")

Note that these expressions, although not always included in dictionaries, are subject to some degree of conventionalization.

- when an adjacency pair is not completed:

e.g. Max, I asked you a question!

Annie, don't you hear someone say hello to you?

(from Sacks, quoted in Tsui 1994:11)

(cf. in Romanian: Cum spui? literally "What are you supposed to say?")

- non-commitment to the truthfulness of an utterance:

e.g. That's what he said!

(cf. in Romanian: Minte el, mint și eu. literally "If he's lying,

I'm lying.")

- intentional misinterpretation of what a piece of discourse counts as:

e.g. A: I'll show you when we get home.

B: You promise?

- labeling something as irrelevant:

e.g. What's that got to do with it?

(cf. in informal Romanian: Ce-are sula cu prefectura? literally "What's the awl got to do with the town hall?"; Ce te-ntreb eu și ce-mi răspunzi d-ta! literally "I'm asking one thing and you're answering another.")

- the circumstances of uttering a promise must be conventionally right (Condition 8 in Searle 1969:61):

e.g. Never trust a drunk's promises.

Promises to children don't count.

- presupposition-loaded trap questions (e.g. When did you stop beating you wife?) which may trigger a metapragmatic statement from the addressee, such as:

Is that supposed to mean...

Are you trying to insinuate...

- pragmatic hedges

e.g. as far as I know / I may be mistaken but... / correct me if I'm wrong (hedges on the expectation of sincerity)

this may sound like a silly question but... / not to change the subject, but... (hedges on the expectation of relevance)

All these hedges indicate that the speaker is aware of and is trying to observe the requirements for cooperative interaction (Grice's maxims of conversation).

### III. CREATIVE USES OF REFLEXIVE LANGUAGE

For the last part of my paper I will briefly discuss two examples where reflexive language is disguised as object language and thus it transcends our previous distinction between metalanguage and metacommunication.

The first is the text accompanying a cartoon published in Crystal (1995:255):

'ARRIET: "Wot toime his the next troine fer 'Ammersmith?"

CLERK: Due now.

'ARRIET: "'Course Oi dawn't now, stoopid, or I wouldn't be harskin' yer!"

Phonetic spelling, just like phonetic transcription, belong to the meta-level, to the level of reflection. Note that of the two forms of 'now' only the second is reflexive in nature.

The second example is a poem by Alan Maley, a British professor and applied linguist (the numbers in front of each line are mine):

### Taxes of Sin

- (1) No-one knows the woman I love.
- (2) The woman knows I love no-one.
- (3) I love no-one the woman knows.
- (4) The woman knows no-one I love.
- (5) No-one knows I love the woman.
- (6) I love the woman no-one knows.
- (7) No-one I love knows the woman.
- (8) The woman no-one knows I love.

Starting from this text, I have created a task for my MA students of Linguistics as follows: the students are given only the first line and are required to re-arrange the order of constituents (no-one, knows, the woman, I and love) in order

to reconstruct the original poem (the order of the lines is not important). They are instructed not to use any other words apart from the five constituents mentioned above and, of course, to apply the “all and only” criterion in generating the remaining seven structures.

Moreover, the task includes one question which is directly relevant to the topic of my paper:

The title of the poem is “Taxes of Sin”. Can you work out its hidden (vague) meaning?

#### IV. CONCLUSION

I conclude my (inevitably) incomplete enumeration in the hope that the examples discussed are illustrative of the fact that there is a metapragmatic level of language, where conversational norms are expressed, or even reflected upon. In this light, I am inclined to believe that participation in a conversation is, concurrently, an instance of conversation analysis.

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