The symptomatic status of symptoms: pathological errors and cognitive approaches to language usage[*]

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Abstract

Pathological speech errors have not properly become either an empirical or theoretical field of inquiry. Although Pragmatics is basically interested in language usage and communication, not all language users and not every instantiation of face to face interaction are taken into account. I argue that the ruling out of "certain speakers/certain utterances" is intimately related to both the philosophical origin of Pragmatics and the grammatical bias present in its approach to language. Pathological anomalous utterances violate the very bases of the field: (1) the language user shows not to be in control of language – which collides with the notion of the subject as epistemic (2) it is difficult/impossible to attribute a grammatical description to such utterances. Therefore, the evaluation of their contextual dependency, their relevance or adequacy is barred. I claim that pathological errors can be handled within a linguistically based theoretical approach to the functioning of language which excludes considering the subject as an epistemic one.

Key-words: *pathological speech erros; symptomatic speech; pragmatic approaches to pathological speech; cognitive approaches to pathological erros.*

ARTIGOS

Resumo

As falas sintomáticas não têm recebido atenção devida no campo dos estudos lingüísticos. Embora a Pragmática tenha como objeto/questão a linguagem em uso e a interação, nem todos os usuários e nem toda comunicação têm sido consideradas. Entendo que a exclusão de certos falantes/certas interações está intimamente relacionada, tanto à sua origem filosófica, quanto à perspectiva gramatical adotada na abordagem da fala. Sustento que as falas sintomáticas violam as próprias bases desse campo: (1) o falante não se mostra em controle da linguagem – o que fere a concepção de sujeito epistêmico e (2) não é possível realizar uma descrição gramatical stricto sensu dos enunciados ditos patológicos. Portanto, a avaliação de sua dependência contextual, sua relevância ou adequação fica inviabilizada. Proponho que erros patológicos podem ser abordados por uma teoria que implique a ordem própria da língua e uma concepção de sujeito dividido (psicanalítico), que é compatível com a implicação do funcionamento da linguagem.

Palavras-chave: *erros patológicos de fala; fala sintomática; abordagens pragmáticas da fala patológica; abordagens cognitivas da fala sintomática.*

Resumen

El habla sintomático no ha recibido debida atención en el campo de los estudios lingüísticos. Aunque la Pragmática tenga como objeto los usos del lenguaje y la interacción, ni todos los usuarios, ni toda la comunicación ha sido considerada. Entiendo que la exclusión de determinados hablantes y interacciones está intimamente relacionada tanto al origen filosófico de la Pragmática como a la perspectiva gramatical como a la perspectiva gramatical adotada en el abordaje del habla. Defiendo que hablas sintomáticas violan las bases de ese campo: (1) el que habla no muestra controlar el lenguaje – eso ofende la noción de sujeto epistémico y (2) no es posible realizar una descripción gramatical "stricto sensu" de los enunciados dichos patológicos. Por lo tanto, la evaluación de su dependencia contextual, su relevancia o adecuación queda inviabilizada.

Propongo que errores patológicos pueden ser abordados por una teoria que implique la orden própria de la lengua y una concepción de sujeto dividido (psicanalítico), lo que es compatible con implicar el funcionamiento del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: *Errores patológicos del habla; habla sintomática; abordajes pragmáticos del habla sintomática.*

The so-called pathological errors can be conceived of as *symptoms* of a particular nature insofar as *they show up in speech itself,* either as *systematically ill-structured sequences* or *as well-structured sequences* which produce an effect of perplexing strangeness which isolates a speaker from all the other speakers of the same language (Lier-De Vitto & Arantes, 1998). Errors are inherent to language usage but pathological speech erros *do have* a special character, which is not apprehensible in ill-formed grammatical sequences. I would like to call attention to the fact that errors in general are not avoidable in speech and that the pathological effect of errors is not properly apprehensible in *corpora* descriptions.

If errors are not avoidable in "language at play," that means that they are not accidental but constitutive of speech. Indeed, errors of different kinds and nature do show up in speech but one should keep in mind that there are tolerable/interpretable errors (acceptable, recognizable and corrected, witty, etc.) and intolerable/pathological errors (unacceptable, unpassable ... not witty at all). As I mentioned before, they are not recognizable as "pathological" unless a striking peculiar effect is produced on the other speakers so that the imaginary feeling of "sameness" is blurred. The point is how to approach the specific nature of pathological errors.

I claim that, although intuitively recognizable by native speakers of any given language, pathological errors have not become an empirical or theoretical field of inquiry among language scientists and researchers. The reason I see for that refers to the fact that *the normal-pathological polarity* has not been faced on theoretical grounds, i.e., it is not actually discussed *as such* but is handled in a naïve/intuitive way (Lier-De Vitto, 2001).

One should keep in mind that neither the category "normal" nor the "pathological" one is pertinent to the program of scientific Linguistics, which is basically concerned with either the correct/incorrect opposition or the possible/impossible one as related to a rule, i.e., to an empirical proposition (Milner, 1989). In the attempt to spot and circumscribe pathological errors, researchers resort to and make use of its descriptive tools, which were not even devised to tackle language "in usage" (Lier-De Vitto, 2000 and in press). In this case, researchers seem to admit that the specific nature of pathological errors can be identified *in language data* through the use of linguist*ics'* descriptive tools.

The naïvety I mentioned above refers to the fact that, when pathological speech errors are at stake, *language usage* must necessarily be taken into account, and *language usage* is *ruled out from the empirical realm of Linguistics*. One could state that speech-pathology researchers attribute to Linguistics a knowledge about specific empirical facts which are not part of its scope. That is why I have labeled the speech pathologists' current relationship with Linguistics "an unfortunate association" (Lier-De Vitto, 1995).

It should be recalled that the very condition for the structuring of Linguistics as a scientific domain relies on the ideal that *language be represented by formal devices*, i.e. "that language be represented by/as a calculus" (J-C. Milner, 1978). That is why speech variability or speech heterogeneity has to be ignored in order to attain *invariability*, which is the necessary step for the building up of a calculus. In other words, the very horizon or ideal that guides and sustains the *science of language* hinders the inclusion of speech and speech errors in its empirical realm.

In fact, Chomsky (1975) says that, "it seems natural *to pay attention to what differs* among people and to neglect structural regularities. But, when we try to understand the *human organism*, intellectual effort of a particular kind is required" (1975: 15). Chomsky clearly and explicitly endeavors to build a strong logically formalized theory which is strictly apart from differences among languages let alone differences in actual speech (Carvalho, 1995; Milner, 1978; Lemos, 1995; Lier-De Vitto, 1999).

As any empirical science, Linguistics must justify its empirical propositions. That does imply a relation with a concrete/empirical realm but, in Linguistics, the word "concrete" does not retain the Aristotelian meaning as *that which is actually observed or attested in usage* (or not observed/not attested in usage). Differently, in Linguistics, "concrete" seems to be closer to the Platonic/Helena meaning as *that, which can occur.* Therefore, *data* should be *accomplishable*, not necessarily observed/attested.

In Linguistics, "data are examples," i.e., they stand as equivalent to empirical propositions – to rules (Milner, 1989) and are called upon to *illustrate* empirical propositions built *a priori*. In other words, it is the *a priori* nature of *empirical propositions* that renders empirical data *predictable* – they

foresee how data must/must not be. It is worth emphasizing that *examples* are disconnected from the text/context in which they actually occurred. In other words, they are *disconnected from language usage*. If, in Linguistics, pertinent data refer to a priori empirical propositions. Speech errors, which do not refer to empirical propositions, are not foreseen. They are not engendered by the rules and, therefore, cannot justify them.

Pathological or not, speech errors occur in language usage. Consequently**,** one could expect that Pragmatics, in directing attention to *usage and communication,* would take pathological speech/ interaction into account. That is not the case, though. Therefore, it seems appropriate to raise the question of why **not all** *language users* and **not every** *instantiation of face to face interaction/ communication* are taken into account, i.e., why they have not become an empirical or theoretical field of inquiry in Pragmatics which, say, aims at retaining the Aristotelian meaning of "concrete" as that which "actually occurs in time and space" (Milner, 1989).

It seems plausible to advance the hypothesis that the ruling out of "certain speakers" and of "certain utterances" is intimately related to (1) *Linguistic Pragmatics' philosophical origin* (Pierce 1848-1925; Morris, 1938; Carnap, 1942; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and, (2) to the *grammatical bias* implied in its approach to language[1].

The philosophical birth of Linguistic Pragmatics seems to have impinged on the field a tendency to be in consonance with the notion of an *epistemic subject,* which displaces the Chomskyan "syntactic animal" (Searle, 1974), that is, the subject of Philosophy is the subject of reason. Traditionally, philosophers sustain that *their relation to referents determines the meaning of language sequences*. This conception has been strongly incorporated by Linguistic Pragmatics. Indeed, the notion of *context-dependent aspects of the linguistic structure* comes to the forefront and indicates that, although the term "context" may stand for a variety of different domains (Parret, 1988), all presuppose some kind of *non-linguistic referent*, be it natural or psycho-sociological.

As to language usage, the notion of "context" (referential, existential, situational, and so forth) brings forth the idea that the speaker has the "ability to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate" (Levinson, 1983: 24). That being the case, one must assume that the speaker has *the knowledge of language* and that he is also *able to detect pertinent natural or socio-cultural features* so as to convey meaning adequately. We are face to face, then, with a subject who, on the one hand has *internalized language* and, on the other hand, has *cognitive distance* in relation to the context, i.e., we are face to face with the epistemic subject.

Note that in Pragmatics, the speaker is a "language user. " What is it, then, that he puts into "usage?" Nothing but *his/her knowledge of language to convey meaning.* In societal-biased Pragmatics the reference issue is displaced from the "natural" to an internalized/conventional domain but this displacement does not actually change the status of the speaker as "epistemic subject". Indeed, s/he is still a "language user" since *meaning* is referred back to the *user's intention* (and to the addressee's acknowledgement of the intended meaning). In fact, Verschueren says that Pragmatics "deals with language use which involves **cognitive** processes, taking place in a **social** world" (1995: 1). That is, by the way, what is implied in notions like "presupposition," "conversational implicature," "intentional inferences" and "recognition of discursive genres", which are present in pragmatic approaches.

In addition to the close relationship Pragmatics entertains with Philosophy, the endeavor to mark out its scope seems to have left reflections about the structure and/or the functioning of language out of its boundaries. As Verschueren states, "Pragmatics does not deal with language form as such ..." (1995: 1). So defining and/or delimiting the domain of Pragmatics can be seen as tentative efforts in drawing the line between Pragmatics and Semantics (Levinson, 1983), which presupposes previous language structure mental representations. I would like to call attention to the fact that in Linguistic Pragmatics, language is both *presupposed*

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[1] It should be said that Austin stands as an exception in the above list. As Felman (1980) points out, the introduction of the criterium "happiness/unhappiness" to apply to an act of speech, introduces a subversive trend in philosophy *insofar* as it displaces the philo-sophical true/false criterium.

knowledge and a *vehicle/medium* for the speaker as 'user' to express meanings, be they contextual or conventional.

It is worth emphasizing that *the area is not devoted to criticizing hypotheses concerning the status of such representations*. In fact, the area deals with "meaning" in language use and seems to have suspended considerations as to the structure and functioning of language. One could state that the relation of the speaker is with language, is with "meaning," not with the signifier.

Pragmatics is devoted to formulating and discussing general principles underlying language usage, which should also "account for the potential failure of valid **schemes of reasoning**" (Levinson, 1983: 3*)*. In other words, Pragmatics aims at postulating cognitive principles, which regulate adequate or successful language usage/ communicaton, i.e., meaningful usage and communication. It can be stated that violations of such principles would, then, refer back to those cognitive principles. Violations would result in "unsuccessful" language usage and in miscommunication.

This being the case, the correct-incorrect or possible-impossible polarities settled in Linguistics are displaced by the successful/unsuccessful opposition which is directly related to "*valid/invalid schemes of reasoning*", i.e., to valid/invalid cognitive operations. In brief, the polarities established in Linguistics refer back to the theoretical sphere of "**a priori** empirical propositions." The opposition introduced in Pragmatics to approach language usage refers back to the cognitive domain, that is, to "schemes of reasoning."

When errors are at stake, researchers may at most recognize that pathological speech either "does not follow the rules" or they may admit that it "violates principles of language usage." In the first case, one is forced to raise the hypotheses that *what the speaker utters does not reflect her/his knowledge of language* or that *the knowledge of language has not been properly internalized*. In the second case – that of language usage principles violation - the problem, then, is that the user must have applied invalid schemes of reasoning and has, thereby, violated some of the cognitive principles that underlie language usage and communication.

I would claim that errors and pathological errors pose an empirical challenge to cognitive approaches to language, which is the basic tendency in Pragmatics. Firstly, because they seem to provide strong counter-evidence to the assumption that either *what the speaker utters has to do with his / her* **knowledge** *of language* or that he/she *has applied invalid schemes of reasoning **in using language***. Pathological errors defy the very notion of knowledge so conceived.

To begin with, I would like to say that the successful/unsuccessful polarity is not operative in distinguishing between the so-called "pathological errors" from other types of "speech errors." Being bipolar, such an opposition can, at most, discriminate "successful" from "unsuccessful" language usage as referred back to violations of pragmatic principles. I insist that such a polarity cannot tackle the heterogeneity within the domain of errors. Thus, "pathological" anomalous utterances, though recognizable, cannot be investigated either on empirical or theoretical grounds in Pragmatics.

Let's now examine two dialogical sequences held between two speech therapists and their patients. Sequence (1):

Therapist and a eight-year-old girl:

(1) T. *Você foi, foi, foi com quem no casamento?*
(2) V. Eu, meu pai, o João, pai dele, né?
 A Ana, minha mãe e o meu irmão e o primo do meu irmão, o Elton, né? ... que
 se chama / e eu.
(3) T. *Quem é o João? E a Ana?*
(4) V. Ana? Eles dois, ahn … fi … o Elton … a mãe - a Ana é a mãe do Elton.
 O pai é o pai do Elton. Aí, minha mãe e o meu ... pai do meu irmão, né? Só ...
 Aí, e a Ana e o João, ó. Eles têm um filho, né? Um filho, o Elton.
 Aí são ele mermo.
(5) T. *Entendi nada der nada, Vã. .*
(6) O João ...
(7) O João ...
(8) E a Ana, O Elton, né? É o ... a mãe do Elton ... ele, a mãe dele.

What could we say about this dialogue? That in an intriguing and obscure way the child's speech is related to the therapist's (although no perscrutable "scheme of reasoning" can be detected). In (2) the child's speech seems to refer back to the therapist's question "*com quem …?*" (in 1), since the girl produces a sequence of kinship terms and proper names which is followed by a quite odd ill-

structured sequence. The dialogue moves on and in (4), the child's embarrassing utterance muddles proper names and kinship terms and ends up, again, with a non-structured sequence. Therefore, **no** grammatical description applies to the child's utterances.

How could they **codify** meaning? Note that the girl *does speak*, but, I ask, what sort of "*language knowledge*" could be attributed to her? One can observe that those fragments do not properly submit to structural constraints. Besides that, what kind of *reasoning* could possibly be attributed to that child? I dare say that none. It seems to me that the words and sequences produced by the child revolve over themselves in a way which does not proceed to something else. I claim that the child is caught in an unfolding web. I understand that it is pointless to investigate what pragmatic principles she has violated: firstly, because her utterances do not refer back to cognitive operations; *s*econdly, because the particular effect of "pathology" could not be discriminated. Let's observe sequence 2:

Therapist and a 8 year-old girl

(1) *T. O seu pai veio com você*?
  (2) S. Ele veio.
(3) T. *Vocês vieram de ônibus?*
  (4) S. Não.
(5) T. *O seu pai veio com você de carro?*
  (6) S. Veio … ele **tá trabalhando**
(7) T. **Trabalhando***? O quê que o seu pai* **faz***?*
  (8) S. **Ele faz de propósito.**
....
(9) T. *Você vê TV?*
(10) S. É.
(11) T. *Você tem uma* **TV a cores***?*
(12) S. **É, ela é verde.**

What about the above dialogical sequence? One can easily see that it is strikingly different from the previous one. Indeed, a grammatical description can be attributed to each and every utterance. One would have to admit that language has been properly acquired. But, why is it that metacognitive operations do not apply? One could say that the girl has not apprehended pertinent contextual features; that she has not applied valid schemes of reasoning; that she failed when pairing sentences with contexts; and so on. Nonetheless, such pragmatic analyses do not tackle the normal/pathological distinction in language. Indeed, being

bipolar, the successful/unsuccessful polarity can, at most, discriminate "successful" from "unsuccessful" language usage as referred back to violations of pragmatic principles. Indeed, there is something odd about that dialogue. In (2), the girl answers the therapist's question stating that her father "veio [com ela]". In (6), she reaffirms that statement but adds that her father "está trabalhando". In other words, the father is at the same time "aqui [com ela]" e "lá [trabalhando]"! The therapist moves on and asks, "*o quê que seu pai faz?*". The child's answer is absolutely surprising: *"ele faz de propósito".* The same strangeness is felt in (12).

The point is: the "correct/incorrect" polarity if applied does not capture the "pathological effect". Would the successful/unsuccessful pragmatic opposition do? I would say no. Someone could argue that those utterances violate the "sentential relationship to the discursive content." They are certainly discursively unsuccessful but, I insist, in a peculiar way, which cannot be grasped by Pragmatics. Having Pragmatics in mind, the possibility of overcoming that limitation could be the assignment of the girl's language difficulties to a deeper cognitive impairment but this would correspond to the exclusion of "certain speakers" and of "certain utterances" from the realm of "language usage" studies. Pathological errors are the unfulfilled promise of knowledge ascribable to the subject. As Felman (1980) pointed out, "failure" in general indicates that "the bet on cognition cannot be sustained or fulfilled".

I claim that pathological utterances violate, in fact, the very basic assumptions of the field, firstly because the language "user" shows no control over mental grammatical representations and, secondly because she also seems unable to exploit contextual features or to apply any scheme of reasoning. In brief, pathological errors do not reflect knowledge or show any reasoning on the speaker's part. If pathological errors are the unfulfilled promise of knowledge ascribable to the subject, it seems plausible to entertain the possibility of assigning to language itself the determining role, which has been assigned to cognition in Pragmatics.

The examples presented show that language refers to language itself in a peculiar way. The children's utterances are text disruptive (although not interaction disruptive) - they refer back to the therapist's utterances although in an embarrassing way. What I mean is that the reference is dialogical.

Sequence (8), for example, *is not* discursively constrained but it does refer to the therapist's utterance. The same can be said about (12). After all, color - "cores" - has to do with green - "verde" - although not with color TV - "TV a cores".

Pragmatics does not implicate the functioning of language as a "permanent force" (Saussure, 1916) which operates in speech, - "force" which cannot be equated to stable internalized mental representations. That is to say, language is self-governed and not governed by the speaker. Indeed, "failure" indicates, as Shoshana Felman (1980) pointed out, that the "bet on cognition cannot be sustained or fulfilled." Speech errors and pathological errors do challenge cognitive approaches to language use, as I tried to illustrate.

I shall conclude saying that those who are interested in the "pathological effect" of speech errors should revisit the notion of "act" introduced by Austin. First, because his notion of "act" substitutes "knowledge," i.e., it seems to bring forth the idea of a body which must be conceived of as "signified" and which can, for this reason "act," a body captured by language, as Cláudia De Lemos (1992) put it. Besides that, "act" differs substantially from "speech." What I mean is that Austin's notion of "act" paves the way to the dissolution of the knowledge/usage dichotomy and others like competence/performance and *langue/parole*. But this is a question to be dealt with in another occasion.

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