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Human Errors as Functions of Language

Patrick Tourchon

Roman Jakobson extended the traditional communication diagram (which was just based on a sender, a message and an addressee) thanks to his studying speech abnormalities: namely, aphasia. Thus, the importance of context, contact and code occurred to him, bringing the number of relevant language functions up to six: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic.

In this article, we also assume that deviant, off-standard samples of speech are more revealing than regular, standard ones. This leads us to pay attention to some more functions of language: suggestive, looping, and reverberating

Introduction: Pragmatics

The field of semiotic studies called *pragmatics* is a fashionable one nowadays, thanks to “the work of Searle, Grice [and] Clark” (Simon-Vandenberg, 2003). Still, earlier approaches should not be overlooked, for recent developments in pragmatics do not necessarily invalidate what its pioneers have established.

Pragmatics as it is known today actually goes back to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce in the USA (Peirce, 1885-1914), though it has also been independently explored by Mikhail Bakhtin in Russia (Bakhtin, 1953), Raymond Queneau in France (Queneau, 1955) and Roman Jakobson (Jakobson, 1959) in Czechoslovakia, to reach its full-grown stage thanks to Jacques Lacan in France and Dell Hymes in the USA, in the 1960's.

Most of the early builders ignored each other's work. Bakhtin might have influenced Jakobson (Gardiner, 1992), but both were unaware of Peirce's groundwork; Lacan explicitly refers to Jakobson (and therefore, indirectly, to Bakhtin (Gardiner, 1992)). But Dell Hymes elaborated his approach on genres and his concept of Communicative Competence in the 1960's, when no American translation of Bakhtin's

work was yet available, only to recognise, later on, the proximity of his approach with Bakhtin's *translinguistics* (Tourchon, 2001).

What all these scholars had in common anyway was their focusing on *genuine* utterances, on language as it is *actually* used by native speakers, which includes "mistakes", "slips" of tongue (*lapsus linguae*), "misfires", that is, all sorts of *errors*.

Human Errors in Utterances

The concept of Human Error is well known in Cognitive Sciences and applies to many situations, from a plane crash down to a doctor pocketing a tuning-fork for his medical visits instead of the expected reflex hammer, since it always involves "the detection or recognition that the outcome differs from what was expected" (Hollnagel, 2002: 3).

Yet, what is often overlooked is that *all* these situations (the crash *as well as* the erroneous action) also involve verbal communication, *utterances*. Semiotics, and especially pragmatics, therefore has a say in these areas.

Over-specification

To start with an uncontroversial example, an error which is indubitably a *semiotic* mistake, let us read again the first drafts of some TESL Bachelor-candidates' final projects. To elaborate on the theoretical rationale of their studies, the would-be researchers try to refer to linguists they have heard of. But how often do they introduce the lines they copy by a phrase like "Chomsky quotes: '...' "?

Obviously, this is a lexical mistake: Chomsky only *states*, the *student* quotes him. But what does the mistake consist in?

Plagiarism is not a minor issue, temporarily topical in newspapers. It is the major charge ever to be pronounced against an academic paper. On the other hand, quotation is a basic academic privilege, and in most countries copyright protection does not apply below a certain number of lines: the freedom to borrow somebody else's words is internationally granted, *as long as* the quotation remains reasonably short and full reference is given.

The stress therefore is on quotations *identifiable as such*. The over-specification in the cases mentioned above is then hardly a surprise: "Chomsky quotes the quotation I am going to quote..." is merely a

(redundant) way of making the point. It is awkward only inasmuch as it shows a lack of self-confidence: the over-emphasis is symptomatic of the students' fear about his quotation being *misinterpreted* as plagiarism.

Un-specification

Far less straightforward, and therefore far more controversial, are human errors leading to a plane crash.

In his book, *Life Strategies* (1999), Dr Phillip C. McGraw transcribes a portion of the conversation, as it is recorded on the plane black box, between the Captain and his First Officer, just minutes before a fatal crash.

00:01:14 *F.O.:* (referring to the instrument showing the airport to the left, rather than straight ahead.) "What's wrong with this thing?"

00:01:20 *Capt.:* "I don't know, let's just continue on here and it will true up. Just continue."

00:01:32 *F.O.:* "I've recycled this thing, still not right. Didn't we come our initial fix with it working?"

(*Captain does not respond.*)

(*In background, sound of flight attendant giving passengers their final instructions before landing. She thanks them for flying her airline.*)

00:01:48 *F.O.:* "I don't get – This thing is all screwed up – says we are, says airport – this is not – says airport is over there. Why is our heading 060 degrees (northeast)? Is that messed up – is that not right either?"

00:01:54 *Tower:* "Flight 427, you're cleared to land runway 35R, wind 355 at ten knots. Altimeter 30.06."

00:02:00 *F.O.:* "Flight 427 cleared to land – umm – cleared 33R – uhh – 35R."

00:02:05 *Capt.:* "There, I have it centred up. I don't, I don't know what – just come left right now, come left, we go direct to airport. Uhh, we're cleared to land. Start, start – no, hold that. This just doesn't –"

00:02:23 *F.O.:* "Look right. Maybe we should –"

00:02:26 *Ground proximity warning system:* "Beep, beep, pull up. Terrain. Pull up. Terrain. Beep, beep."

00:02:27 *Capt.*: “What the – Pull up! Climb right now. Cli– “ (*sound of impact*)

(McGraw, 1999: 136-137)

Of course, as a psychologist, Dr McGraw mainly underlines the *denial* process: none of these experienced officers is ready to acknowledge the fact that they are lost. So they waste a precious time blaming the instruments instead.

But to a semiotician or a cognitivist, the fact that all this takes the form of a *dialogue* cannot be overlooked. Communication is also involved here, and its main feature is the *un-specification* of the core concept. Words referring to misdirection are *removed* from the utterances, which accounts for the *blanks* left here and there, when the “Captain does not respond”, but also when the First Officer interrupts his sentences (“– says we are, says airport – this is not –”), or when the Captain does so soon afterwards (“Start, start – no, hold that. This just doesn’t –”).

Of course, this can be seen as the direct effect of the denial process. But it is important to underline here that such a *double* denial (*both* the Captain *and* the First Officer delete words) also reveals a double expectation: each officer expects his colleague to first voice out the problem; each of them *entrusts* the other, and so delays the moment to take the blame on himself.

In other words, individual psychology and its single denial process are hardly valid here: the *semiotic* process of a *dialogic relation* (Bakhtin, 1953) takes over. An actual language is used, utterances are pronounced, which are distorted, not only by an individual un- or pre-conscious, but also by their very *dialogic* essence.

Rhetoric Specification

Still more intricate, because no actual dialogue can be recorded, is the individual *erroneous action*. This is the most controversial of human errors in our approach, because no language seems involved at all. No utterance is heard. So, how can semiotics fit?

Dr Sigmund Freud himself confesses, in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1904), having almost left his consultation room once, with a tuning-fork in his pocket instead of the reflex hammer he intended to bring.

Again, his first emphasis is more on the mechanism of this human error than on its dialogic aspect:

For many years, a reflex hammer and a tuning-fork lay side by side on my desk. One day, I hurried off at the close of my office hours, as I wished to catch a certain train, and, despite broad daylight, put the tuning-fork in my coat pocket in place of the reflex hammer. My attention was called to the mistake through the weight of the object drawing down my pocket. Anyone accustomed to reflect on such slight occurrences would, without hesitation, explain the faulty action by the hurry of the moment, and excuse it. In spite of that, I preferred to ask myself why I took the tuning-fork instead of the hammer. The haste could just as well have been a motive for carrying out the action properly in order not to waste time over the correction.

“Who last grasped the tuning-fork?” was the question which immediately flashed through my mind. It happened that only a few days ago, an idiotic child, whose attention to sensory impressions I was testing, had been so fascinated by the tuning-fork that I found it difficult to tear it away from him. Could it mean, therefore, that I was an idiot?

(Freud 1904: 83)

At first sight, language has nothing to do with the miscarried action: a similarity of *attitudes* (a fascination for the tuning-fork) is sufficient for Freud to compare himself with the idiotic child.

Yet, his mistaken gesture can still be seen as a *metaphor* for a lack of intelligence, which, to a doctor, might translate into a mistaken diagnostic. A warning about the major risk in the medical profession thus lies behind the whole episode, *telling* the physician to be more careful through a *hyperbole* whereby a gross error stands as the signpost for far more subtle ones. Even at that stage then, language (in its *rhetoric* form, with figures of speech such as *metaphor* and *hyperbole*), is involved.

Furthermore, even though it was for Lacan, to explicitly claim that “the symptom is itself structured like a language” (Lacan, 1953: 65), so that dreams, for instance, have “the structure of a sentence” (Lacan, 1953: 63), Freud had already hinted many times to that description as well. For immediately after wondering whether he was as idiotic as the child he examined a few days before, he goes on:

... Could it mean, therefore, that I was an idiot? To be sure, so it would seem, as the next thought which associated itself with the hammer was *chamer* (Hebrew for “ass”).

But what was the meaning of this abusive language? We must here inquire into the situation. I hurried to a consultation to see a patient who, according to the anamnesis which I received by letter, had fallen from a balcony some months before, and since then, had been unable to walk. The physician who invited me wrote that he was still unable to say whether he was dealing with a spinal injury or traumatic neurosis – hysteria. That was what I was to decide. This could therefore be a reminder to be particularly careful in this delicate differential diagnosis. As it is, my colleagues think that hysteria is diagnosed far too carelessly where more serious matters are concerned. But the abuse is not yet justified. Yes, the next association was that the small railroad station is the same place in which, some years previous, I saw a young man who, after a certain emotional experience, could not walk properly. At that time, I diagnosed his malady as hysteria, and later put him under psychic treatment; but it afterward turned out that my diagnosis was neither incorrect nor correct. A large number of the patient's symptoms were hysterical, and they promptly disappeared in the course of the treatment. But back of these, there was a visible remnant that could not be reached by therapy, and could be referred only to a multiple sclerosis. Those who saw the patient after me had no difficulty in recognizing the organic affection.

I could scarcely have acted and judged differently; still, the impression was that of a serious mistake; the promise of a cure which I had given him could naturally not be kept.

The mistake in grasping the tuning-fork instead of the hammer could therefore be translated into the following words: "You fool, you ass, get yourself together this time, and be careful not to diagnose again a case of hysteria where there is an incurable disease, as you did in this place years ago in the case of that poor man!" And fortunately for this little analysis, even if unfortunately for my mood, this same man, now showing a very spastic gait, had been to my office a few days before, one day after the examination of the idiotic child.

We observe that this time it is the voice of self-criticism which makes itself perceptible through the mistake in grasping. The erroneously carried-out action is specially suited to express self-reproach. The present mistakes attempts to represent the mistake which was committed elsewhere. (Freud, 1904: 84)

Thus, the action as a *metaphor* ("a reminder"; "the voice of self-criticism"; "to express self-reproach"; a mistake attempting "to represent" another mistake...) is truly understood as such by Freud himself. But the key point goes even further than that: not only was a previous mistake metaphorically represented by the present one, but "abusive language" was used to warn against its repetition, and the largest part of this short analysis is actually dedicated to interpreting, not

the mistake *per se*, but the insult “ass” as encapsulated in the pun (or the rhyme) “hammer / *chamer*”, for the mistake can be “*translated into [...] words*”.

The confusion of *words* (hammer / *chamer*) through the confusion of things (hammer / object-of-focus-for-idiotic-children) therefore is a *rhetoric specification* of the situation (a possibly tricky medical consultation) and of its risks. Language and a very elaborate one at that, with puns, rhymes and bilingualism (the German *Hammer* matching the Hebrew *chamer*), is then again the core of the whole episode: “every unsuccessful act is a successful, not to say ‘well turned’, discourse” (Lacan, 1953: 64).

Still, if human errors, ranging from plane crashes to everyday mistakes, via lexical confusions, are all connected to language, what *functions* of language are involved?

In 1959, Roman Jakobson already described communication as a complex process involving six factors: not only a message, its sender and its addressee, but also a context, a code and a contact:

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER.....MESSAGE.....ADDRESSEE

CONTACT

CODE

To each of these factors corresponds a language *function*:

REFERENTIAL

EMOTIVE.....POETIC.....CONATIVE

PHATIC

METALINGUAL

The question is: can these functions account for the human errors described above?

The Referential Function

Like all messages, the utterances quoted above imply a context, a *referential* function.

The students quoting Chomsky refer to real situations of communication. The flying officers refer to a real place, an airport, and to instruments. Freud refers to an action in a specific place and time. The lexicon used by the students is centred on a performative verb (to say “I quote” is to *perform* the action of quoting). The conversation of the two flying officers is centred on the *referential* interpretation (where is the airport?) of the data they get. Freud’s self-insult is centred on the *actual* risk of misdiagnosis.

The core of all these utterances is always referential: in terms of *content*, this is what matters. Yet, each real utterance is dealing with much more than its context, much more than just its content. Its form is of paramount importance as well.

The Emotive Function

Also labelled as the ‘expressive’ function, the emotive function, centred on the sender, aims at allowing the locutor to express his own attitude toward his topic. This would account for the somewhat critical attitude of the flying officers towards their own initial assumptions, when they grow restless about their first (dismissive) reading of the compass. It would account as well for Freud’s self-criticism in the whole episode of his erroneous act. Still, the exact degree of specification (over-, un-specification, or rhetoric specification) shaping each utterance is not properly addressed. The students, flying officers and doctors, all show a critical attitude, and yet, they specify their utterances in three incompatible ways.

Conative and Phatic Functions

Neither have their various degrees of specification anything to do with the conative and phatic functions. In fact, these two functions are noticeably absent here. Even while discussing the situation, the two flying officers never use the conative function. They never actually call or instruct their addressee. In the same way, they all let the ‘contact’ take care of itself. While struggling with the meaning of their data, they assume that the communication will go on. They utterly neglect the phatic function. Flying officers as well as students and doctors in the cases mentioned above are instead concerned with their encyclopædias, and are therefore more likely to give priority to the poetic and metalingual functions.

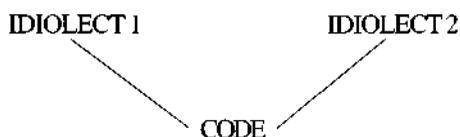
The Metalingual Function

All the examples given by Roman Jakobson to illustrate the metalingual function are questions about meaning ('I don't understand'; 'what do you mean?'). This function then mainly revolves around the lexicon. True enough, the use of the verb *to quote* is regulated by English dictionaries, but the students' dealing with this lexical problem take an overemphasising form. They do not define the verb, they do not explain it or elaborate on it. On the contrary, they misuse it by enforcing it upon the addressee for fear of miscommunication.

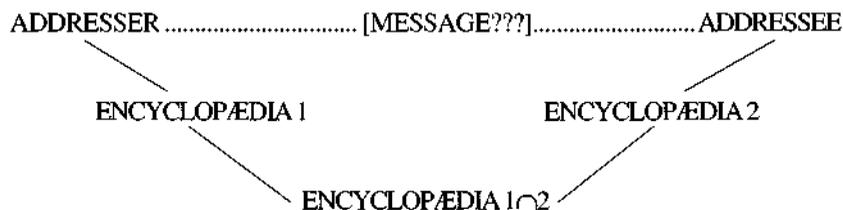
In other words, far from clarifying the content of the message, the locutors here acknowledge a gap in the communication process and try to bridge it.

In such cases, communication follows this sort of route:

ADDRESSER..... MESSAGE..... /gap/..... INTERPRETANT..... ADDRESSEE



Conversely, the meaning of the data the two flying officers get is blurred to the point of illegibility. Somehow the message is not conveyed, so that the addressee is left with a huge interpretative problem. It is for each officer to assess the situation *in spite of* his colleague's denial. The metalingual function this time is utterly missing, for no proper lexicon is used. Instead, shared encyclopædias are supposed to take over and fill in the blanks, in a communication process that looks like this:

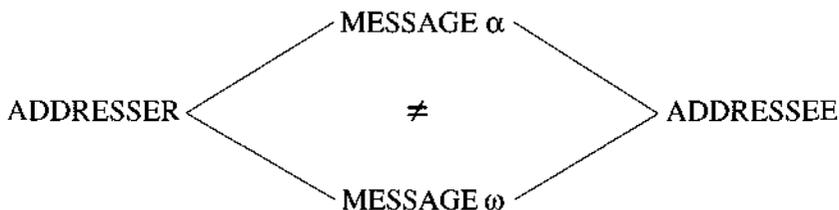


The Poetic Function

The choice of a figure of speech, like a rhyme, a metaphor or a hyperbole, is yet more typical of the poetic function. Freud's preconscious pun on *Hammer / chamer* is therefore fully anticipated by Jakobson's diagram.

By characterising his attitude as "donkey-like", Freud indeed makes use of a "principle of equivalence" between the epitome of the medical profession, the (reflex) hammer, and the epitome of stupid behaviour, a donkey, an ass (*chamer*). Furthermore, he "projects th[is] principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" (Jakobson 1959: 71), since he constructs his whole utterance on a phonetic proximity.

And yet, since the utterance "who gets a hammer is a *chamer*" competes with another "translation" of Freud's erroneous action (given by the psychoanalyst himself as "could it mean, therefore, that I was an idiot?"), the poetic function is present/absent in the message, as if several routes were open, depending on whether the rhyme *Hammer/chamer* is used or not:



At any rate, Jakobson's functions here seem insufficient, because none of them ever refer to the gap or to the competing messages the actual utterances quoted above reveal. When it comes to Human Errors, some more functions are obviously needed.

The Looping Function

Freud's aim, as his own addressee, is to "translate" his erroneous action into a language he can understand. So, he tries hard to specify his own attitude. The trouble is that MESSAGE α (rather *referential* since it elaborates on a similarity of *behaviours* in front of the same *object*, a tuning-fork) sounds mechanistic to him, while MESSAGE ω (more rhetoric with its use of rhymes) sounds off-beat: after all, if the *Hammer* had really been taken, Freud would not have looked like a *chamer*; it is

only because he took a tuning-fork instead, that he looks stupid, but then the pun is *not* between *Diapason* and *chamer*!

The two messages are thus incompatible *and* defective in different ways. Freud then hits the \neq in the diagram above, and uses the *looping* function, a to and fro movement between MESSAGE α and MESSAGE ω , to eventually convey the idea.

Suggestive Function

Conversely, the flying officers do not convey the correct idea at all, or at least, not until it is too late. Far from sending redundant messages to make sure the point is taken, they entrust too much their partner with interpreting abilities. They keep *removing* words from their utterances, expecting the *blanks* to say what they mean. Using a *suggestive* function, they shunt the message, which is hardly delivered at all, to pass through their respective encyclopædias, hoping that ENCYCLOPÆDIA 1 and ENCYCLOPÆDIA 2 intersect somewhere in an ENCYCLOPÆDIA 1 \cap 2.

The Reverb Function

The locutors who keep focusing on the *gap* between the encyclopædias, or between idiolects, will tend to worry about their addressee's *interpretant*. They do not rely much on the code in itself, but, unable to use IDIOLECT 2, which belongs to their addressees exclusively, and unsure about the intelligibility of their own IDIOLECT 1, they let their words *reverberate* the meaning, letting the important *signified* contaminate all the *signifiers*: the signified "quotation" undermines the verb *to state* so much that the signifier [stIt] is read [kwot], or /state/ is spelled /quote/.

Conclusion

The last three functions, *looping*, *suggestive* and *reverberating* are new in the sense that they never appeared in Jakobson's communication diagram. Yet, they are indispensable to fully account for some Human Errors.

One reason why these functions have never been isolated so far partly lies in the fact that some Human Errors are not commonly regarded as involving language at all.

Another probable cause for the three functions described here to have been overlooked is that they become identifiable only if some instances of Jakobson's communication diagram are split: the code has to be split into idiolects to reveal a *gap*; the message has to be split between its *a* (basic form) and its *w* (rhetoric form) to show that the *process* of selection as such (#) sometimes directly interferes with the actual utterance; and finally, the encyclopædias have to be pinpointed within what is usually labelled as the "context" to map the route of a meaning that is expected to be conveyed even though no clear message is ever delivered.

Still, it would be an overstatement to assert that "Jakobson's six functions [...] are no longer a valid framework for current work in the study of language" (Simon-Vandenberg, 2003).

Jakobson has shown how to elaborate on the basic communication diagram

(ADDRESSER.....MESSAGE.....ADDRESSEE)

after his attention was drawn to the problems it poses by his studying aphasia.

Now, it is only by following the method he initiated, by paying attention, as he did, to non-standard utterances, that some further details can be added to his own six-function initial diagram

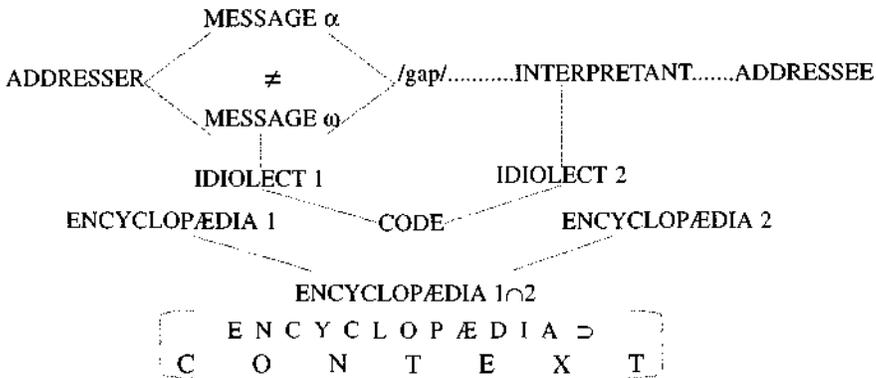
(ADDRESSER.....MESSAGE.....ADDRESSEE

CONTEXT

CONTACT

CODE).

A genuine utterance, with all the approximations (forcing the locutor to focus on the selection (≠) process [see *looping* function]), the reluctance (forcing the locutor to rely on the common encyclopædic area (∩) [see *suggestive* function]) and the emphases (forcing the locutor to focus on the *gap* [see *reverberating* function]) it implies, follows a route which is not *that* straight:



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