

On the norms of communication

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I would like to draw your attention to the topic more often studied in the framework of social sciences than within psycholinguistics. Social norms and norms of communication rank among elementary concepts of social psychology, pragmatics and last but not least communicative linguistics.

In social theory, «a norm is a general principle which makes it possible to judge human actions as right or wrong» (ELL 1994, 2834); the terms «norm» and «rule» are used interchangeably. While the norms of language are often regarded as norms of correctness, norms of communication are defined as implicit rules or principles regulating the selection of appropriate communicative (verbal and non-verbal) means with regard to a given community and current situational context. Norms of communication cover both the norms of language and norms of behavior.

Norms, however, do not have a social aspect only. Every individual has to learn them to be able to communicate successfully, they are, therefore, a part of the knowledge system in the individual's mind. For this reason I think the norms of communication should be studied not only by social sciences but also by psycholinguistics.

In this paper I only intend to give a rough outline of psycholinguistic approach to norms.

1. The first question is how the norms of communication are acquired, i.e. how they are created in the mind of an individual.

Learning the norms is a lengthy process. We can presume that in the course of ontogenetic development of an individual, communicative norms are established as a component of language acquisition, as a part of communicative skills acquisition. The child learns all the communicative skills in the active interaction with the adults and other children. They regulate and guide his/her speech and behavior in harmony with the habits prevailing first in the family and later in other communities. The criterion of norm is thus becoming an inseparable part of the acquired (both verbal and non-verbal) means: «Knowing what to say is never enough, it is also necessary to know how to say it. By how the use of appropriate register, variety, code, etc. is meant.» (ELL 1994, 2835). Let us add that it is not only registers, varieties and codes but also text patterns and communicative strategies that have to be chosen from. In other words, the child acquires not only communicative means but also the information about under what circumstances (in what context) to use them so that his/her way of expression would be informative and instrumental.

There are several key concepts in learning and using the norms: context, repetition, expectation, selection, and obligatoriness.

Repetition is a very important factor in creating (and reinforcing) norms. From an early age the child repeatedly participates in the same type of communicative acts, in the same situational contexts. He/she perceives which communicative means are usually used and gradually makes his knowledge more precise as to which of them are appropriate. Intuitively and unconsciously he creates expectations in his mind as to how the communicative act he participates in will proceed. Norms – as R. Bartsch (1985, 163) puts it – are internalized expectations.

The child, however, is not only a recipient or observer in these communicative acts, he is also their active participant. The child intuitively imitates behaviour of his or her communicative partners (adults or children) and thus continuously verifies the knowledge acquired through his or her own communicative practice. He learns to guess which communicative means (and what kind of behaviour) are expected from him. He himself gives them preference to others, he starts to perceive them as binding. He starts to understand that both in the family and in the community of children certain habits are observed. He starts to understand that if he adheres to them too, he will be successful. Gradually he develops a sense of communicative norms obligatoriness. From the individual's point of view, it is obligatoriness what forms a fundamental feature of norms.

The above mentioned outline of the acquisition of norms is very simplified; learning the norms is a complex process with many specific aspects. Moreover, it never ends. Norms are connected with the environment/context, with the partners of communication as well as with the goals of communication. Therefore, whenever we enter an unknown environment (a new student at school, an unknown family, office, new job or hobby) our expectations are vague at first and then gradually we learn the norms of the new environment.

2. I would like to mention some of those aspects of communication which are regulated by the norms. Namely there are two of them: effective exchange of information and positive relations among communicative partners. They are used across languages.

2.1. A well known example of common norms which serve the purpose of achieving the maximum effective exchange of information is a cooperative principle provided by P. Grice (1975). Gricean maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner regulate one aspect of communication, i.e. cooperation of partners in rational talk; they are also called norms of rationality. These maxims are formulated as strategies directed to the acting individual:

- (1) Make your contribution as informative as required.
- (2) Try to make your contribution one that is true.
- (3) Be relevant.
- (4) Be perspicuous.

The individual intuitively acquires these strategies and intuitively uses them, if he is interested in rational talk exchange.

2.2. Next widely accepted norm, regulating relations among partners in communication is politeness (in spite of cross-cultural variations).

What does a polite behaviour mean? It does not only mean focus on the cooperation with the partner to achieve the effective exchange of information. It also means emphasizing positive relations among communicating partners. From the angle of rational talk exchange, politeness is redundant, in some cases it is even contradictory to it (Nebeská 1996, 83). Politeness regulates a different aspect of communication, i.e. it reduces friction in personal interaction.

Politeness does not include speech etiquette, as e.g. greetings, forms of address, leave-taking etc., it includes complex strategies. An individual intuitively acquires strategies of politeness and uses them in communication in the speech acts which might result in misunderstanding, friction or aggression, e.g. request, apology, disagreement, correction, complain, refusal, etc.

The use of the polite strategy is a complex mental process; e. g. as to the apology, the polite strategy includes the admission of some offense, assumption of responsibility, expression of regret and offer of compensation (ELL 1994, 3112). In accordance with this strategy, an individual chooses appropriate communicative means to apologize. Polite strategies of other speech acts represent similarly complex mental processes.

Politeness principle as a complement to Grice's cooperative principle was formulated by Leech (1983) in 6 maxims and then by Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as by other scholars.

Another example of keeping to the generally accepted norms of communication is avoidance of taboo words. An individual knows them but does not use them. In accordance with the norms, he uses, especially in public communication, more appropriate expressions.

3. To sum up my considerations: Norms embrace longitudinal experience of an individual from personal interaction. In my opinion, norms of communication can be regarded as a part of knowledge system in the mind of an individual, as a principle of its organization. In personal interaction, norms have both supporting and restrictive functions; on the one hand they serve as a guiding principle of the selection of communicative means in a given context, on the other hand they act as a constraint determining which means should be avoided (Nebeská 1992, 90).

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