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Introduction

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The interest in social psychology, conceived broadly, and language presents a rather unusual and heavily punctured history. However bizarre it sounds, this concern predates the history of experimental psychology. Its origins can be located in the middle of the nineteenth century, to the then emerging concentration of the relationship between Völkerpsychologie and language (Lazarus and Steinhal, 1860). Indeed, a journal with that precise label (Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft) was founded in 1860.

The focal concern was that one could not appreciate human functioning within the then prevailing elementaristic psychology. The critique stated that an elementaristic psychology was decontextualized from its social and more distinctly cultural frame. The theme about contextualizing social psychology in the late sixties and early seventies (for example, Israel & Tajfel, 1972) is one which resembles in some of its features this earlier debate. The comparative element, cultural psychology, is a theme which has gained credence in recent years (see, inter alia, Shweder, 1990; Cole, 1990; Jahoda, 1992; Wertsch, 1991). In contrast, interest in the social psychological implications of language can be traced back over a number of decades; it is only recently that a tradition of the 'social psychology of language' has emerged (cf., for example, Giles and Coupland, 1991; Giles and Robinson, 1990). This is somewhat surprising in view of the fact that much of our behaviour essentially involves communication and is manifested in language use. What is more surprising in this context is that within this emerging tradition the interplay of language and social cognition has occupied a minor role to date, and it is only very recently that interest in this field has begun to grow (for example, Brown and Fish, 1983; Hoffman et al., 1984; Hoffman et al., 1986; Semin and Greenslade, 1985). A precursor of this type of orientation is to be found in Fritz Heider’s classic, The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations (1958). Language provides the medium in which social knowledge in general and knowledge about interpersonal relations
in particular are mapped, and this was in large part the agenda in Heider's (1958) work. Knowledge about the world and social reality are generated, articulated and communicated through the medium of language. This is not to deny or question the relevance of non-verbal communication. However, it is difficult if not impossible to imagine how systematic and coherent communication could be sustained only by non-verbal means. Knowledge about the world in general but also about social interaction and social reality are mapped into language in an integral way. Language does not only contain the distilled or crystallized knowledge of generations before us; it enables us to structure our present by bringing the past to bear upon it, and also furnishes a medium by which bridges to the future may be built.

One could argue that the question of why language has been neglected in social psychology and related areas is somewhat misleading. It is misleading mainly because there are large pockets of research that are concerned with language, though they are not identified as such. For instance, there is a long-standing tradition that has its origins in the crossroads of person perception and taxonomic models in personality (cf. Semin, 1990), and that has been concerned with identifying the underlying structure of trait terms (adjectives). The problem has been that such research has been concerned with attempts to identify the intrapsychological implications of such structures: what is the structure of personality, or what does it tell us about the way in which people process information? The neglected partner has been language, and if it was introduced it was introduced in opposition. Are the consistent patterns merely a reflection of 'certain language conventions', 'mere semantic patterns' with no psychological reality? The issue that has been largely ignored is that language conventions, semantic patterns and wording effects are an integral part of cognition in social context, which is generally referred to in terms of an interface or dialectical relationship between language and psychological reality. For instance, Cattell has noted that

The position we shall adopt is a very direct one ... making only the one assumption that all aspects of human personality which are or have been of importance, interest, or utility have already been recorded in the substance of language. For, throughout history, the most fascinating subject of general discourse, and also that in which it has been most vitally necessary to have adequate, representative symbols, has been human behaviour. Necessity could not possibly have been barren where so little apparatus is required to permit the birth of invention. (Cattell, 1943, p. 483)

The current expression of this perspective can be found in
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taxonomic approaches to personality that utilize Cattell’s view as a general guiding principle. This view is now termed the ‘sedimentation’ or ‘lexical’ hypothesis (see Goldberg, 1981, 1989) and is assumed to even predate Cattell (that is, Galton, 1884). The important point with regard to this and other related work is that the perspective guiding this research has not attempted to incorporate an explicit language-based angle to the regularly and systematically patterned factorial solutions of trait terms. Nevertheless, it is in principle possible to advance at least semantic arguments for the regular factorial solutions, as has been done, however controversially, by Shweder (the systematic distortion hypothesis, Shweder, 1982).

But there are other approaches (more directly within current social psychological work on social cognition) that can equally well be treated as furnishing a language-based approach to social cognitive processes. This is work that is concerned with what Schneider (1991: 548ff) subsumes in his recent review of social cognition under ‘structural differences among traits’. These studies suggest systematic differences between different traits (adjectives) with respect to different inferential processes. Essentially, this work is concerned with identifying properties or parameters of adjectives that invite differential inferences or delimit cognitive processes in certain ways. One example is Rothbart and Park’s (1986) suggestion that there are systematic differences between adjectives in terms of the ease or difficulty with which they can be confirmed. Adjectives with a negative semantic valence are easy to acquire (for example, you need few instances of confirmatory behaviours to infer the property ‘dishonest’ in a person) and difficult to get rid of (that is, you need many instances of disconfirming evidence). The reverse is found for positively valenced adjectives. You need many confirming instances of evidence to be seen as having a property such as ‘honest’, and just a few or even one to lose it. With some qualifications, this research has been replicated (Funder and Dobroth, 1987). Rothbart and Park’s work is intellectually related to earlier work by Reeder and his colleagues (for example, Reeder and Brewer, 1979; Reeder, 1979) showing that the higher diagnosticity of negative behaviours is typical for morality-related behaviour. An opposite pattern holds for ability-related behaviour, where positive evidence (success) is often more diagnostic than negative evidence (failure).

The point within the perspective of the interface between language and social cognition is that obviously these differences are related to certain properties of traits (not only semantic valence or
social desirability: see Rothbart and Park, 1986), but there is no explicit or implicit anchoring of such trait inferences in some linguistic framework. In contrast, other approaches were developed from considerations about the linguistic properties of adjectives (such as their morphological relations to different verb classes), which attempt to elucidate the nature of trait terms and their socio-cognitive meanings (see Semin and Fiedler, 1991; and Chapter 2 below, by Semin and Fiedler, for recent elaborations on interpersonal verbs). Further work in the adjective domain examines other systematic properties of trait terms with regard to stability, causality, duration, hierarchical relations and breadth (Chaplin et al., 1988; Hampson et al., 1986; John et al., 1991). Yet again, there is other work on properties of adjectives addressing trait classes as they relate to behavioural manifestations (see, for example, Reeder and Brewer, 1979; Reeder, 1979; Reeder et al., 1982; Reeder et al., 1977). These strands of research are also developed with internal criteria; that is, psychological criteria about the properties of traits. Consequently, no externally identifiable markers of the distinguished classes or properties of adjectives are explicated — for instance, in terms of specific semantic, morphological, or other linguistic criteria that are independent of the intrapsychological (cognitive inference) measures.

In conceiving of the interface between language, social interaction and cognition, one can think of different foci of analysis. One of the important elements that has occupied centre stage in social psychology is how knowledge is mapped into categories and how a potentially infinite universe is managed by introducing categories that make the complexity of our universe manageable. This focus on the cognitive properties of social categories is a fundamental enterprise in terms of understanding how our social world is divided. Part 1 of this volume is devoted to this basic issue.

It is also important to understand whether and how the way in which social interaction and interpersonal relations are mapped into diverse categories is reflected in language. Thus, the theme of Part 2 is whether there are social or extra-individual representations or ‘carriers’ of the categories we find in interpersonal language and whether these display systematic intrapsychological processes (such as cognitive inferences).

The next question is how people strategically employ devices such as different categories, or category names. This cuts to the heart of the matter of how different social psychological phenomena are maintained, manifested and transmitted. Obviously, there may be certain regularities in the way specific
linguistic categories are manifested, but this does not mean that the particular uses of such categories are constrained in discourse. Any social event is open to multiple descriptions, multiple interpretations. Thus, the choice of terms and their strategic use mediates different messages about the same empirical event. It is here that we move from the examination of how distinct types of knowledge are mapped into language to the examination of how distinct types of social psychological phenomena are expressed by differential use of linguistic devices. These issues are addressed in Parts 2, 3 and 4 of this volume.

Finally, in Part 5, the analysis of language as a repertoire of social knowledge is broadened to include the uses of certain syntactic forms in addition to lexical substance. In general, the extent to which cognitive processes may be constrained by syntactic rules seems to be much less understood at present than the substantial, semantic constraints addressed in the earlier chapters.

The manner in which the themes of each part are fleshed out by the individual contributions to this volume is as follows. The two contributions in Part 1 examine properties of categories in the social domain. The emphasis is on the relationship between social categories and social reality. One of the interesting questions in this regard is the types of inferential potentials that different categories acquire and the reasons as well as the implications of these differences for social cognition. As Rothbart and Taylor (Chapter 2) point out, certain social categories carry extraordinary inferential power. In examining how and why certain linguistic labels or symbols map rich inductive information, they utilize a conceptual bridge that brings together Gordon Allport’s classic work on the *Nature of Prejudice* (1954) and recent developments on categorization (such as Medin, 1989) employing both diachronic and synchronic perspectives of analysis. Reeder, Pryor and Wojciszke (Chapter 3) examine the behaviour–trait inference relationship by proposing a four-part typology that suggests differential patterns of relationships between traits and their behavioural manifestations. In doing so, they advance a model that furnishes a systematic basis for differentiating between different trait categories governed by different inferential schemes that guide inferences from behaviours to traits or dispositions and vice versa.

The two contributions in the next part, employ a taxonomic model of interpersonal verbs and adjectives, which is derived on the basis of genuinely linguistic criteria that are independent of the cognitive–social phenomena the model is intended to account for. The model was developed in order to examine how different features of interpersonal relationships are marked in language.
Chapter 4 (Semin & Fiedler) presents some of these properties of word classes and then examines how underlying features of attribution are anchored in interpersonal language. The main argument developed in the fifth chapter (Fiedler and Semin) is that the differential use of linguistic styles in communication are responsible for a variety of attributional phenomena. Thus, the intention is to draw attention to the extra-individual element, namely the medium that carries attributional phenomena, rather than merely to focus on intrapsychological phenomena. Fiedler and Semin also elaborate on the issue of the dialectical relationship between interand intrapsychological phenomena, namely language and cognition, emphasizing that the issues cannot be understood with the unidirectional causality assumptions that have prevailed for a long time in the domain of linguistic relativity.

The contribution of language to the maintenance and transmission of stereotypes is the theme of Part 3, ‘Language, intergroup relations and stereotypes’. Despite the substantial amount of research that characterizes the domain of stereotypes and intergroup relations, the properties of the communication process itself, namely the type of language used to describe ingroup and outgroup, has never been the subject of systematic research until recently (Maass et al., 1989). Maass and Arcuri, in Chapter 7, introduce a model of how stereotypes are sustained and transmitted by identifying distinct properties of communication. They find that the differential use of abstract or concrete communicative styles by ingroup members to describe ingroup and outgroup members serves distinct functions. The work by Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner and Sherman (Chapter 6) also focuses on the relationship between stereotypes and language in the context of communication – that is, spontaneous language use. They examine the diverse linguistic options that are available to a communicator and how the communicator strategically deploys these options in relevant intergroup or stereotype contexts.

 Chapters 8 and 9 in Part 4 are devoted to ‘Communication and social cognition’ in the context of dyadic situations involving communicators and recipients. The common denominator of these two chapters is their reliance on the Gricean (1975) principle of cooperative communication. Thus, communicators have to shape their messages according to the informational needs of the recipients, who in turn have to figure out the communicators’ intentions from obvious as well as more subtle aspects of the message. The focus here is on actual communication rather than language as a system or structure. The intriguing contention of McCann and Higgins in Chapter 8 is that a communicator’s attempts to shape
a verbal message in accordance with the recipients’ needs and expectations will not only affect message content itself but will also feed back to change cognitive representations within the communicator. Thus, aside from the permanent representation of social knowledge within language as a system, cognitive information processing may even depend on strategic short-term variations in language use. Strack and Schwarz’s contribution (Chapter 9) addresses communication in standardized questioning situations (such as interviews or questionnaires) involving survey researchers and respondents as interactants. Although these standardized procedures were developed to control or eliminate language effects that might obscure the result, Strack and Schwarz show that such standard formats cannot prevent respondents from adhering to the norm of cooperative communication, interpreting subtle cues such as question order or response alternatives to infer what kind of information the researcher wants to get.

Part 5, ‘Words, reasoning and presuppositions in social cognition’, begins with a contribution by Terry Au (Chapter 10), who examines criticisms of research on linguistic relativity, using the issue of counterfactual reasoning as a vehicle. While the alleged absence of markers for counterfactuals in Chinese and the alleged deficits of Chinese people in counterfactual reasoning have been considered as prime evidence for linguistic relativity, Au provides abundant evidence that Chinese people engage in counterfactual reasoning as much as people in other linguistic communities. This is because everyday life creates multiple opportunities to use counterfactual thinking if only to experience emotions such as regret or gratitude, or to fantasize and enjoy fictions and dramas. Cognition as well as language reflect these opportunities and, in fact, a closer look at language shows that linguistic markers for counterfactuals do exist, although in the form of more subtle devices. Similarly, Chapter 11 by McGuire and McGuire is concerned with seemingly arbitrary word-order regularities in kinship and food terms as well as series of adjective attributes. To say ‘mother and father’, ‘apples and oranges’, and ‘white silk dress’ instead of ‘father and mother’, ‘oranges and apples’, or ‘silk white dress’ does not appear at first sight to serve an obvious function or to reflect some rational principle. However, closer analysis reveals that such word orderings may reflect cognitive or affective factors such as phonological ease, cognitive availability or affective involvement. At the same time, we learn that linguistic regularities reflect manifold influences and change with time and social context, therefore evading a simple and invariant explanation. However, even when the origins of such word-order regularities are
complex and difficult to understand, deviations from such rules may be utilized in communication to convey subtle information. The closing chapter by Graumman addresses the important issue of perspectivity in communication, and reports studies based on a theory of perspectivity developed by the author. The main line of the argument revolves around a fundamental question of whether all knowledge is perspectival. After discussing the problem of perspectivity as it is found in language, literature, cognition and language use, he presents empirical work of how perspectivity influences text production, comprehension, memory and the relationship between speaker and hearer perspectives.

Thus, the aim of this volume is to introduce considerations about language in a more systematic way into social cognition and communication processes. In a different sense, it is an attempt to introduce the social into social cognition, and to start by pointing out one possible response to the question posed by David Schneider in his Annual Review lament: ‘Where, oh where, is the social in social cognition?’ (1991: 553). We think that the beginnings of an answer can be found in research on the dialectical relationship between language and social cognition. Even if this means at times that one has to exaggerate the one or the other element in this dialectic.

References


