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Squib: Kant's pragmatics

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Abstract

In a recent issue of Journal of Pragmatics, Nerlich and Clarke (1994: 440) quote Searle (1984: 25) on the recency (hence the supposed "fun") of speech act analysis. He says: "You can't go and find Kant's view on apologising or congratulating, as far as I know". They go on: "We intend to show that one can go and find views on speech acts, such as orders or demands in the past, perhaps not in Kant himself, but certainly in the writings of some of his followers and contemporaries". In this exchange Searle, Nerlich and Clarke all betray a fundamental ignorance of Kant's writing which I would like to correct, albeit briefly.

It is true that one would hardly expect the philosopher of pure reason and the categorical imperative to have spent much time on such impure and empirical matters as apologising, congratulating, ordering or demanding. Though, if some recent research is to be believed, the irresolvable conflict and antinomy between the transcendental and the empirical was, for Kant, part of a quite practical ascesis or spiritual discipline (Hunter, 1994). Turning away from speculation, however, and towards Kant's actual writings, it also happens to be true that, late in his life, Kant turned his attention away from metaphysics and towards anthropology; away from pure reason and towards the proper conduct of everyday life; away from speculation and towards analysis. In his Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798/1798) - essentially composed of his very late lectures at Königsberg - one can indeed find discussions (mostly of a prescriptive nature, it's true) on topics which overlap to some degree with contemporary issues in pragmatics and, conceivably, in the branch of it known as speech act analysis. I will

mention only three, quoting much, interpreting little and leaving questions of their import to the (I hope intrigued) reader.¹

Firstly Kant is interested in language, particularly "egoistic" language or forms of first-person self-reference. Here he pays a great deal of attention to the currently crucial question of the relation between language and power, the ways in which certain forms of speech mark out and are appropriate to social positions and forms of authority - particularly those of the head of state, the King. "The language used by the head of state, when speaking of himself to the people", writes Kant (1978: 13), "is nowadays in the plural (We, King by the Grace of God...). The question arises whether the meaning of this is not rather egoistic, that is, indicative of the speaker's own authority". Kant is evidently asking whether or not we can have psycho-authorial intentions as the semantic anchors of certain speech acts. He quickly rejects such a naive premise (common though it is today in intentionalist theories) and moves instead to a more historical explanation: "It appears to be a fact, however, that such formality in speaking about the highest authority was originally to indicate condescension (We, the King and his Counsel, or Estates)". Then the question becomes purely philological: "But how does it happen that the reciprocal form of address, which was formerly expressed in the old classical languages by the familiar Thou in the singular, should later be indicated by the formal You in the plural when spoken by various (chiefly German) peoples? Kant explains the historical shift in terms of the pragmatic structure of address terms in his native German: "For the sake of giving greater distinction to the person addressed, the German language uses two distinctive expressions, namely he and they [Er/Sie] (as if it were not a form of address at all, but a story about someone absent, be it one person or more)". Hence, the pragmatic structure allows a connection between formal grammatical possibilities and the local production of narratives, used precisely as performatives to gain certain illocutionary effects: in this case the conceit that the one addressed is so socially distant and distinct as to be physically absent. What is present when the actual person is absent is an office, a "quality of his station": "This has finally led, to complete the absurdity, of the use of such expressions as Your Grace, Right Honorable, Right Noble, High-and-Noble, in which the speaker, rather than pretending to humble himself before the person addressed, shows deference instead to the abstract quality of his

station". Note the genuinely pragmatic (even empiricist) concern here: it is precisely the idea that language might be used to address the essence of an office, rather than a living empirical man, that Kant finds absurd. Then, to complete the analysis, Kant returns to utterly practical historical matters to explain how this philological twist came about: "Probably all this is the result of feudalism which saw to it that the degree of respect due the socially more distinguished not be violated in a hierarchy extending from the royal dignity down through all the stages until even human dignity itself ceases and only man remains, that is, down to the position of serfdom, where a man is addressed by his superiors as you [du], or down to the position of a child who is not allowed to have his own way" (1978: 13-14). A social hierarchy based on the co-ordinates of class (position in regard to the means of production) and age, is therefore, mapped by a pragma-linguistic hierarchy of non-reciprocal address forms. The whole analysis is a cogent and cross-disciplinary amalgam of history, philology, speech act theory and, perhaps most disturbingly, of a kind of Boy-Meets-Tractor linguistic Marxism avant la lettre.

Having seen how Kant seems to want to offer a somewhat counter-intentionalist analysis of language, let us now proceed to see that he is just as capable of moving on to the other foot when it comes to the topic of facial expressions - an important pragmatic topic today, indeed one which has become a sub-discipline of general kinesics. Like many before and after him, Kant was interested in the relation between facial expressions and the emotions (intentional objects, if ever there was one - although ones which are less subject to expressional control than, say, beliefs and opinions, if Kant is to be believed): "It is difficult to hide the impact of emotion from some facial expressions; emotion betrays itself by the careful restraint from gesticulation, or in the tone itself" (1978: 213). Note the complexity here: it is not that one can simply read off emotion from its expression: rather there is a negative phase intervening - the restraint from gesticulation is what may betray the underlying psychological state. Though there will be those who are simply too weak to exercise due control ("he who is too weak to control his emotion, will reveal his inner emotions through facial expression ... even if he would rather like to hide and conceal them from the eyes of others"), one can, nevertheless, successfully hide one's emotions from one's interlocutor's gaze. This involves an "art", and one which breeds artifice and deception: "Once they have been found out, those who

have mastered this art are not considered the best people to deal with in confidence, particularly when they know how to fake expressions which contradict their real actions". Today we might refer to a disjuncture between illocutionary force (action) and perlocutionary intent (conveyed emotion). But Kant's reason for analysing such disjunctures was not merely technical. He had a quite pragmatic (in the sense of useful) end in view: analysis can help us see through deceptions, if only our semiotics of emotional expression is well enough constructed for such practical ends. Kant gives us an example of this very pragmatic pragmatics: "When anybody who ordinarily is not cross-eyed tells a story and looks at the point of his nose and consequently looks cross-eyed, then the story he is telling is a lie. But one must not count in this category anyone who squints because of defective eyesight, because he can be entirely free from this vice". This is very useful information indeed - information which readers might wish to test empirically next time they witness a cross-eyed storyteller, though they might beware of at least one caveat not mentioned by Kant but pertinent to his case when we realise that, judging by his letters, Kant himself spent many an hour away from his philosophical labours searching for an efficacious laxative.² Finally, Kant offers us a typology of universal facial acts and the illocutionary and/or perlocutionary effects they necessarily produce: "Moreover, there are gestures designed by nature, by which people of all races and from all climates understand each other without prior agreement. Among these gestures are nodding the head (in affirmation), shaking the head (in negation), lifting up the head (in objection), shaking the head (in wonder), turning up one's nose (in mockery), smiling ironically (in grinning), having one's countenance fall (upon the refusal of a request), knitting the brows (in vexation), rapidly snapping and locking the jaws (bah!), beckoning towards and away from oneself with the hands, throwing up one's arms (in astonishment), clenching the fist (in threatening), bowing, laying a finger on the mouth (compescere labella) in order to command silence, hissing and so forth" (1978: 213-4). So, far from Searle, Nerlich and Clarke's uninvestigated assumptions about Kant, he was manifestly interested in many pragmatic and speech-actional matters including affirming, negating, refusing (requests), threatening, commanding (silence) and the like. Albeit he believed there to be para-linguistic and, moreover, universal gestures for their accomplishment - which

many today would doubt - but it's still wrong to assume that he just wasn't interested.

Thirdly and finally, Kant was interested in conversation, though in a quite peculiar way. He begins his essay "On the Highest Ethicophysical Good" (1978: 185-191) with a rather abstract description of a conflict or dialectical theory of human conduct: "The two kinds of good, the physical and the moral, cannot be mixed together, because they would then neutralize each other and have no effect on the purpose of true bliss. Rather, inclination to pleasurable living and inclination to virtue are in conflict with each other, and the restriction of the principle of physical good by the principle of moral good constitute through their very conflict the whole purpose of a well-bred, partly sensuous and partly ethicointellectual human being" (1978: 185, my italics). The virtuous person, then, is not he who can resolve this conflict. For it is irresolvable. Rather, the virtuous person is he who properly manages this conflict on a day to day basis. Kant takes the example of dinner party conversations where the problem is how to act with the proper decorum but not to be so stiffly proper as to limit one's own and one's fellows' pleasures. He comes up with a set of rules for conversational sequencing (not entirely distinct from those one can find in the few pieces of conversation analysis (CA) which have been given over to topic shifts in whole conversations) and a set of speakers' maxims (not entirely distinct from Grice's).

Turning to the first first: Kant says that a dinner conversation must go through three stages: narration, reasoning and jesting (1978: 189). "The first stage concerns the news of the day, first domestic, then foreign, received from personal letters and newspapers.... During the second stage, when this first appetite has been satisfied, the company gets livelier, because, in arguing back and forth, it is hard to avoid a variety of judgment about one and the same object under discussion. Since no one has a low regard for his own judgment, a dispute arises which continues to whet the appetite for food and drink; and in proportion to the liveliness of the dispute and the participation in it, the food is felt to be beneficial.... In the third stage, because reasoning is always a kind of work and exertion of energy, this finally becomes difficult after eating rather copiously during the dinner. Consequently, the conversation turns naturally to the mere play of wit, partly also to please the lady in the company who is encouraged by the minor, intentional, but not insulting attacks on her

sex to shine in her own display of wit. Thus the meal ends with laughter" (1978: 189). Note how this natural sequence takes us from the morally uplifting (exchanges of news) to the physically pleasurable (laughter) via an intermediate stage encompassing both (the solemnity of reason and the play of disputation). Note too how the sequence parallels the stages of the meal, such that the "appetites" for talk and consumption are both controlled and allowed a wilder expression.

In addition to this sequential component, Kant offers us a set of five maxims which can come into play at any point in the sequence. Again, the point is to find equipoise between physical well-being and moral virtue. The first maxim is: "choose topics for conversation which interest everybody, and always give everyone a chance to add something appropriate" (1978: 190). Note how this approximates both Grice's stipulation that we speak relevantly, and CA's discoveries concerning discourse strategies for avoiding schism. Second maxim: "do not allow deadly silence to fall, but permit only momentary pauses in the conversation". Again we find here a version of the distinction in CA between gaps and pauses as well as a version of the crucial insight from CA that gaps and pauses tend to be owned, to be the responsibility of particular speakers. Third maxim: "do not change the subject unnecessarily, nor jump from one subject to another.... An entertaining subject must nearly be exhausted before one can pass on to another; and when conversation stagnates, one must know how to suggest skillfully, as an experiment, another related topic for conversation". This maxim covers the whole domain of topic shift, just as, once more, it reminds of Grice's stricture on relevance. Kant is also aware that topic is locally managed, that participants must use skill in that management and that they must monitor conversations for their upcoming topic boundaries. Fourth maxim: "Do not tolerate the beginning or continuation of anything dogmatic ... avoid such seriousness by means of a jest deftly introduced". Here Kant shows that he knows the difference between the conflict that necessarily underlies social action and surface disagreements which are merely contingent and avoidable. He shows also that he knows not simply the structure of speech acts but also their sequential relation to one another: in this case the use of joking to defer seriousness. Final maxim: "In any serious conflict that cannot be avoided, control yourself and your emotions carefully so that mutual respect and good faith will always prevail. What counts more is the tone ... not the

content of the conversation". Again, Kant shows that while surface disagreements may be contingent in a strictly philosophical sense, they are not always pragmatically avoidable. He also seems to be aware that para-linguistic aspects of talk (here, the tone and other aspects connected with the display of emotions - see above) may be able to work in ways which modulate the actual content of the talk. He distinguishes crucially between the talk as topic and how the talk is done.

Whatever we may think of Kant's analyses of first-person talk, facial expression and conversation, there is no doubt - Searle, Nerlich and Clarke notwithstanding - that he did consider such things. We can go and find his views about matters such things as apologising or congratulating - or at least we kind his views about some very similar things. Purged or not of its obvious political incorrectness and its clearly prescriptive aspect, we may yet see a genuinely Kantian branch of pragmatics. Not one taken from "the writings of some of his contemporaries and followers" but one generated directly from his own anthropology. Nerlich and Clarke do not claim to be philosophers, so it's understandable that they don't know that Kant had an anthropology. Searle has no such excuse.

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Notes

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1. ••If intrigue is all the reader wants, they might be interested to know that the Anthropology also contains, in a footnote, a commentary on Heidegger.

2. ••I thank Dr J. Malpas for this important contribution to the history of philosophy.