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Agonistic Elements in Dialogic Exchange

A statement such as «You have an ugly face!» seems to be an odd conversational beginning, because it must inevitably have a rather dampening effect on any dialogic exchange. How can we explain this negative effect? Is insult really so unusual? Can we rely on Gricean pragmatics as an explanatory matrix for the effects of insult? Do insulting utterances blatantly violate any of the maxims that govern conversation, and if so, what sort of mental manoeuvres must be made by the recipients of insult, of abuse or of vilification in order to save what GRICE calls the cooperative principle (CP)?

Insult may appear to belong to a rather narrow range of speech acts, and answers to the questions I raised will therefore seem to be of rather limited applicability, such as, say, to the analysis of the discourse among aggressive male adolescents. But is insult not really a more pervasive phenomenon? Is it not an insult of the audience if they are confronted with lies, if they are offered too little or too much information, if they have to face irrelevant utterances or obscurities? Is it not so that the work of inference to be performed by the recipient, which GRICE calls *implicature*, is often a defensive or even a retaliatory activity?

This notion that dialogic exchanges contain strongly agonistic elements must be kept in mind when we analyse literary texts in terms of Gricean pragmatics. The sort of logical inference that is necessitated by violations of the Gricean maxims is frequently governed by concrete questions about the distribution of power between the communicator (here and throughout considered to be a woman) and her audience. Such questions are:

1. How does the communicator present herself, i.e. what role does she assign to herself? Does she assume a superior or a subordinate role, does she try to seek or to give information?
2. Does the communicator try to justify or to criticize any of her actions?
3. What role does the audience have to assume in order to save the CP? A superior or a subordinate one? Should the audience be a seeker or a giver of information?
4. What attitude or mode of identification does the audience have to assume in order to save the CP? Should the audience justify or applaud or criticize any of the communicator's actions in order to maintain cooperation?

The view of conversational dialogue as an agon does not necessarily imply that conversation inevitably creates insulters and the insulted, or winners

and losers, although the agon does lead to specific role distributions which may be experienced as humiliating defeats by one of the participants in the communication process. Indeed, the only definitive winner in dialogic struggle is silence. Therefore, as long as a dialogue is maintained, the word «noncommunication» is only a metaphor for the threats to end conversation. Violations of the Gricean maxims often are such threats, and our investigation will focus on some representative modes of endangering conversational continuation in two contemporary American writers. The beginnings of two short stories by Frederick and Donald BARTHELME will demonstrate how violations of conversational maxims will always, although to a varying degree, challenge the audience's readiness to cooperate.

As a first example, take the beginning of Frederick BARTHELME's story «Pool Lights.» (117)

There are things that cannot be understood – things said at school, at the supermarket, or in this case by the pool of the Santa Rosa Apartments on a hazy afternoon in mid-summer. A young woman wearing pleated white shorts and a thin gauze shirt open over her bikini top introduces herself as Dolores Prince and says, «You have a pretty face.» Automatically, you smile and say, «Thank you,» but, looking up at her, wonder why she selected that particular word, that adjective.

She is small, already tan, delicate but not frail. Her dark hair is in a braid tight against her scalp. «I mean it,» she says, dropping her canvas tote on the pea-gravel concrete apron of the pool. «It's all soft and pink.» She steps out of the shorts and snaps the elastic around the leg openings of her swimsuit.

«It's the shirt.» You pluck at the collar of the faded red alligator pullover, then point at the sky. «Bounces off the shirt.»

As in most texts by Frederick BARTHELME it is the woman who both opens and at the same time jeopardizes conversation. Her conversation opening is precariously situated between compliment and insult. «You have a pretty face» and «It's all soft and pink» are odd compliments paid to a man because these adjectives run counter to stereotyped ideals of male attractiveness to women. As compliments these adjectives flout GRICE's maxim of Relevance. Dolores thus opens the conversation with an assignment of implicature: the second-person narrator has to infer reasons for the communicator's choice of the adjectives «pretty», «soft» and «pink», reasons that allow the elimination of the offensive and insulting potential of the woman's utterance.

The recipient's, and thus the narrator's work of implicature is therefore primarily justificatory. His manoeuvre of justification in the present passage is two-pronged. It is argumentative and evasive. He argues that Dolores is mistaken about the true colour of his face. This manoeuvre only takes care of the adjective «pink», however, and the insulting tendencies

of «pretty» and «soft» remain unjustified. But he prefers not to invest any further thought. In fact, he has admitted at the very beginning that he has given up the work of implicature: «There are things that cannot be understood.» He is a truly soft-headed narrator.

The reader of Frederick BARTHELME's texts often has to take over the work of implicature which the male protagonists refuse or are unable to perform. The reader's inferences, based on the four questions mentioned above, could in the present case come to the following conclusions:

1. Dolores, the communicator, presents herself as the woman in control; it is she who strikes up the conversation, thus reverting the usual distribution of sexual roles.

2. Her discourse contains no trace of an apologetic or self-criticizing nature.

3. In order to save the CP the recipient has to accept the role foreseen for him. The prettiness, pinkness and softness of his face predestine him for the role of the new American male as a helpless baby who cannot understand the world and who will alternatively be coddled, swaddled or bullied.

4. The mode of identification with «delicate but not frail» Dolores would in JAUSS's terms (252) be the admiring one: she is the new American hero, the new Prince who carries «You» away.

The discrepancy of awareness between the reader and the male protagonist, who refuses to perform the work of implicature, constitutes the gap in which Frederick BARTHELME's satire is couched. The gap of awareness between the pink-faced narrator and the reader exposes the You's folly and weakness, but also the new woman's insulting aggressiveness. For both Dolores and the narrator, communicative options are limited, because the confrontation remains static – just as the stereotypical virago and the wimp are static types – and no negotiations about the distribution of power take place. Similar agonistic phenomena can be observed in the following text by Frederick's older brother Donald BARTHELME:

Basil from Her Garden

A – In the dream, my father was playing the piano, a Beethoven something, in a large concert hall that was filled with people. I was in the audience and I was reading a book. I suddenly realized that this was the wrong thing to do when my father was performing, so I sat up and paid attention. He was playing very well, I thought. Suddenly the conductor stopped the performance and began to sing a passage for my father, a passage that my father had evidently botched. My father listened attentively, smiling at the conductor.

Q – Does your father play? In actuality?

A – Not a note.

Q – Did the conductor resemble anyone you know?

A – He looked a bit like Althea. The same cheekbones and the same chin.

Q – Who is Althea?

A – Someone I know.

Q – What do you do, after work, in the evenings or on weekends?

A – Just ordinary things.

B – No special interests?

A – I'm very interested in bow-hunting. These new bows they have now, what they call a compound bow. Also, I'm a member of the Galapagos Society, we work for the environment, it's really a very effective –

Q – And what else?

A – Well, adultery. I would say that that's how I spend most of my free time. In adultery.

Q – You mean regular adultery.

A – Yes. Sleeping with people to whom one is not legally bound.

Q – These are women.

A – Invariably.

Q – And so that's what you do, in the evenings or on weekends.

A – I had this kind of strange experience. Today is Saturday, right? I called up this haircutter that I go to, her name is Ruth, and asked for an appointment. I needed a haircut. So she says she has openings at ten, ten-thirty, eleven, eleven-thirty, twelve, twelve-thirty – On a Saturday. Do you think the world knows something I don't know?

Q – It's possible.

A – What if she stabs me in the ear with the scissors?

Q – Unlikely, I would think.

A's initial speech defines the place and the persons of the dialogue: this purports to be a conversation between a psychoanalyst and his patient. A offers clues about his personality by recounting a dream. The reader is thus confronted with the stereotypical situation of analysis, a situation which is characterized by strict patterns of role distribution, a situation also where it is clear who is asking the questions (Q) and who is supposed to answer them (A). Here one would expect there to be little room for violations of conversational rules. A presents himself as a person who is used to subordination, his tucking away of his book in the concert hall being a gesture of dutiful obedience. This gesture of humility mirrors his father's behaviour, who smiles at the conductor when he singles him out before the whole audience. Subordination seems to run in the family.

But A's apparent cooperativeness is not borne out in the following conversation. This dialogue is characterized by a high degree of obedience to the maxim of Relevance on the part of Q, but the very reverse on the part of A. «Relevance» is related to the Latin «relevare», which means «to take up again», and although this is not the etymology usually given for the word «relevance», it certainly well describes Q's conversational procedure: he takes up the clues contained in A's contributions. Q's procedure is based on the principle of exploiting the relevance of utterances:

When ... interconnected new and old items of information are used together as premises in an inference process, further new information can be derived: information which could not have been inferred without this combination of old and new premises. When the processing of new information gives rise to such a multiplication effect, we call it *relevant*. (SPERBER, 48)

It is exactly in this way that Q tries to process what he considers the relevant features of A's, the analysand's, statements. The relevance that Q is after is a confession of sexual misconduct. From A's attribution of female facial features to the male conductor in the dream he infers a homosexual tendency in his analysand, thus his question: «You mean *regular* adultery»? Q's single-tracked view of relevance emerges in his impolite breach of role-taking rules when he interrupts A's evasive exposition on the virtues of the Galapagos Society.

Q is of course right to be impatient with A, who may well be taking the mickey out of his inquisitively prurient interlocutor. A is in fact insulting Q with his breaches of the maxim of Relevance. These breaches test Q's abilities of inference and thus of retaliation, and Q fails this test. A's contributions are a sophisticated mixture of bluntness and evasiveness, and when these evasions become apparently irrelevant, Q is unable or unwilling to retaliate. Thus A's story about the hairdresser with too many openings in her schedule appears to be utterly disconnected from the issue of adultery, although hairdressers' scissors are these days associatively linked with adultery by the fear of AIDS. Q responds to this apparent irrelevance with non-committal evasiveness, his evasiveness either camouflaging his puzzlement or – the more likely solution – his own fear of the disease. The analysand uncovers the analyst's repressed fears.

Both Frederick and Donald BARTHELME's texts exemplify the agonistic elements in dialogic exchange. Both show the undermining of traditionally dominant roles in the confrontation with interlocutors who flout the rules of conversation. The interlocutors' responses are not, however, identical. Frederick's «loser» is rigidified into a pose of communicative refusal, whereas Donald's «loser» will put up a fight and turn into a true quester rather than a stupid questioner in the course of the text.

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