



iada.online.series

Dialogue Analysis XI

Proceedings of the 11th IADA Conference on 'Dialogue Analysis and Rhetoric', University of Münster, March 26-30, 2007

Edited by

Edda Weigand

1/09

Implicitness in Dialogue

On the boundaries between rhetoric and grammar

Valerij Dem'jankov

Moscow Lomonosov University & Russian Academy of Sciences

Standards of speech explicitness vary from culture to culture, because different cultures presuppose different degrees of reliance on interpretive skill of the addressee. Interpretive measures of speech efficiency transcends the boundaries of grammar. Certain parts of stylistics lying outside national measures of speech efficiency may belong to universal stylistics.

1. Stylistics and rhetoric of conversation

Like stylistics, rhetoric of conversation has to do with the choice between different ways of expression which are regarded as semantically but not pragmatically equivalent. 'To say or not to say' and 'How to say' are two crucial problems of rhetoric having to do with this kind of variation. The difference between 'Shut up!', 'Be silent!' and 'Keep silent!' is an instance of this variation.

Stylistics is a discipline explaining why this or that choice from a certain number of alternatives may take place and how this choice influences the interpretation of the whole expression in context.

Rhetoric, on the other hand, introduces such factors as intentionality and efficiency of the use of certain expressions under certain circumstances, relying on standards and paradigmatic cases of human interaction. Thus, classical text books on rhetoric report of especially effective paradigm cases in the practical activity of the students.

I am going to illustrate a possible approach to contrastive rhetoric of conversation.

The boundaries between rhetoric and stylistics on the one hand, and grammar on the other hand, are rather vague, because some grammatical and lexical means serving stylistic/rhetoric purposes in dialogues may be grammaticalized and grow grammatically obligatory in some languages, whereas in other languages they may be optional.

2. Interpretive approach to rhetoric and stylistics

In the last years, the interpretive approach to meaning has become widespread according to which meanings are not “contained” in signs but are rather computed by interpreters. Human interaction is looked upon as a result of certain strategies of language production and interpretation, and not of extracting meanings from the words. Meanings are considered as what is produced by an interpreter on the basis of linguistic signs.

Several groups of modern linguistic theories realize just this approach, investigating semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic features of language use from this point a view. For instance, conversational analysis, certain versions of speech act theory and of discourse analysis are such disciplines.

Rhetoric, too, may be looked upon from an interpretive point of view. Human societies use different sets of interpretive strategies characterizing ‘interpretive styles’ and ‘interpretive cultures’. What is a good style for Russian is not always acceptable for German, and vice versa. And the ways of understanding the same sequences of speech acts for Russian speakers differ from those of English speakers.

3. Contrastive rhetoric of explicitness and implicitness

Since inter-cultural interactions are possible, too, linguists and anthropologists suppose that there is a universal core of human interpretive strategies (e.g. some of the Gricean maxims) and a set of variable culture-specific parameters. This last sort of variation may be the object of *contrastive rhetoric*. Why contrastive? Not only because of the needs of learning and teaching foreign languages but also because some things are better seen from outside than from inside.

Contrastive rhetoric presupposes that different interpretive cultures rely on different sets of strategies of discovering primary and secondary intentions of the speakers. That is, the principle “Rely on your real and/or potential addressee” has different ranges of application in different human societies.

For instance, there are differences between modern West-European and Russian interpretive standards concerning the first of rhetoric problems, ‘to say or not to say’. That is, human cultures have different standards of explicitness of turn-taking in dialogues and of the speech proper. Thus, in Russia, traditionally an invitation to visit someone must be repeated at least twice, otherwise it is looked at as an ornamental remark. Therefore, if you invite a Russian friend with a single phrase ‘Come to see us on Tuesday by 5 o’clock’ be not astonished if he or she does not come: missing reiteration and not very much used to Western standards of face-to-face interaction, he or she may simply pass it by without notice.

Implicitness and explicitness are notions which may be defined in the framework of an interpretive theory.

3.1. Rhetoric implicitness

Characterizing a meaning as non-explicit, that is, *implicit* in some utterance or turn-taking, interpreters suppose that there is something in the discourse or in the text which is not deducible from the words alone: it is the interpreter who must discover or sometimes unveil the intended understanding of the utterance in question, where the guileful, insidious, perfidious, crafty, treacherous or just “lazy” or inadvertent speaker wants to conceal the proper meaning from an addressee or from an eavesdropper. Irony and sarcasm may be defined in this way.

Or it may be the case that the speaker him- or herself does not really understand what he or she wanted to say. Cf.:

- (1) Lord Caversham: (Turning round, and looking at his son beneath his bushy eyebrows.): Do you always really understand what you say, sir?
 Lord Goring: (After some hesitation.): Yes, father, if I listen attentively.
 (*Oscar Wilde, Ideal Husband*)

The main purpose of the speaker may be then, among other things, masking his or her predicament. Cooperation for proper understanding is then quite natural to be expected.

In a word, implicitness is a sign of interpretive unease, a symptom of interpretive dissatisfaction: the interpreter is dissatisfied with the discourse proper,

- laying in some cases the blame on the inarticulateness of the author or
- magnanimously acknowledging one’s proper lack of intelligence, or interpretive incompetency, in a different extreme case.

3.2. Rhetoric explicitness

Explicitness, on the other hand, means interpretive satisfaction: an interpreter, or “understander”, evaluates something as an explicit sign of something else, if the thing said satisfies all relevant needs for identifying the thing meant. The criteria of interpretive satisfaction, in their turn, are very inconstant and vary from person to person. What may satisfy one addressee may dissatisfy another, more exigent, exacting or fastidious interpreter. You tell someone “Let’s meet in Münster”, and your conversational partner replies: “Where exactly?” meaning that he or she wants to know certain details in advance.

4. Standards of dialogic explicitness/implicitness

There are scales of standard and sub-standard dialogic explicitness/implicitness techniques varying from culture to culture. There are also differences between cultures not only belonging to different linguistic communities but also to those

which use the same national language. Thus some people take for granted the following piece of advice of Dan Carnegie: "Criticize yourself before others do it". But others follow a different rule: "Do not criticize yourself, let your best friends do it". In between are cases like this. A professor notes that several students are lively discussing something during his lecture. He may remark: 'Sorry to interrupt you sirs, but I disagree with both of you: Borussia is the best team.'

What is looked upon as satisfactory in the framework of one interpretive culture is considered dissatisfactory or inarticulate in another. This scale of variation is one of the empirical objectives for contrastive rhetoric.

Degrees of explicitness standards of certain conversational formulae vary from one conversational culture to another. For instance, you hear *Guten Tag!*, *Guten Abend!*, *Gute Nacht!* and *Guten Morgen!* in German, but the German for the English *Good afternoon!* ("Guten Nachmittag!") is not as often heard in Germany as in the United Kingdom or in the USA. The Russian *zdravstvujte* literally meaning the imperative *Prosper! / Be healthy!* is the most usual formula in Russia, whereas *dobroe utro* ("Good morning!") etc. are far less frequent if ever used by most of the Russian native speakers. The German *Guten Appetit* may be rendered in many languages, e.g. *Bon appétit* in French, but not in English.

Certain cases of standard explicitness in some cultures may seem over-explicit or even ungrammatical in other cultures.

Take for instance some English constructions with body-parts.

- (2) In his hands he was holding a small bird.
 * In the hands he was holding a small bird.
 They held out their hands.
 * They held out the hands.

Russian translations of these sentences with the possessive pronouns 'his' and 'their' sound expletive and non-natural: Russians usually omit the possessive pronouns in such and other similar cases:

- (3) *V rukax on derzhal malen'kuju ptichku*
Oni protjanuli ruki.

It looks like the Russian speakers do not even admit the possibility that one can hold out someone else's hands or hold a small bird in someone else's hand. The English, on the contrary, seemingly do admit such extravagant cases, the function of the possessive consists in undermining the assumption that one can operate with the help of someone else's body part such as a hand.

A notable exception to this translation rule are such cases as:

- (4) She took him in her arms
 * She took him in the arms
Ona prinjala ego v svoi ob`jatija
Ona prinjala ego v ob`jatija

In Russian, both variants are grammatical, although the first one, according to text statistics, sounds somehow more natural.

Moreover, Russian is known for its indiscriminate use of possessive *svoj* denoting all persons at once: ‘my’, ‘your’, ‘his/her’, ‘our’, and ‘their’. Thus rendering sentences such as

I/you/he/she/we/they took him in my/your/his/her/our/their arms,

you may choose between:

- a possessive form *svoi* coreferent with the subject of the sentence denoting indiscriminately all persons:
Ja/ty/on/ona/my/oni prinjali ego v svoi ob`jatija

And

- possessive forms of respective person:
Ja/ty/on/ona/my/oni prinjali ego v moi/tvoi/ego/ee/nashi/vashi/ix ob`jatija.

This kind of variation has been perplexing Russian grammarians from the 18th century on. The first pattern is ascribed to Greek (via Old-Church Slavonic) influence, whereas the indiscriminating use of *svoj/svoi* is considered an idiosyncratic feature of Slavic languages.

There are cases, however, where Russian is more explicit than English when body parts are concerned.

Thus, in practically every museum all over the world there are inscriptions like:

Visitors are requested not to touch the exhibits.

The most common Russian equivalent looks like this:

Rukami ne trogat’ literally meaning: *Do not touch with hands!*

Mentioning hands is obligatory in such formulae (although, as usual, no mention of the possessor is present even here). Other variants, such as

- (5) *Ne trogat’!*
Ne prikasat’sja!, etc.

meaning *Do not touch!* are grammatically correct but lie outside the genre of museum inscriptions.

5. Conclusions

Conclusions:

1. Standards of explicitness, e.g. of interpretive satisfaction, vary from culture to culture.

2. Different cultures presuppose different degrees of reliance on interpretive skill of the addressee.

3. Interpretive rhetoric measuring efficiency of speech transcends the boundaries of grammar.

4. Certain parts of stylistics lying outside national measures of speech efficiency may belong to universal stylistics.

5. If there are universal laws of speech efficiency, universal rhetoric is possible. Otherwise, we can only investigate national rhetorical rules.

6. My proposal is in between:

I doubt that there are universal measures of speech efficiency: what counts as efficient in one culture may be looked upon as interpretively insufficient in an other.

Therefore, *a priori*, it is doubtful that there are universal rhetorical laws. But as a result of international contacts such measures do arise, growing more and more common as time goes on.

Thus, the laws of Latin rhetoric grew part and parcel of European peoples but not of Chinese culture as yet. Nowadays, we can speak of Euroversal rhetoric but not of universal rhetoric.

7. Comparing different rhetoric means in languages we actually do universal stylistics and not universal rhetoric. Some hundred years later universal rhetoric may become a reality, too.