Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 13(62) Special Issue
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2020.62.13.3.14

What may be done with language

Mariselda TESSAROLO[1]

If one studies the passage from language as a system of signs (langue) to language in its intercultural and dialogic use, a change of perspective takes place because the theory of social action is applied to the study of language, and this theory shows the two aspects of linguistic behaviour: expectation, the social part referred to the langue, with its centripetal character; and actuation, referred to the language, which is the individual part with a centrifugal character. With linguistic actuation, speakers help cause events (agency), even if these are not wholly determined by their linguistic action. The social actor identifies in the situation a number of opportunities that he/she exploits with his/her action, the outcome of which feeds back into the diagnosis of the initial situation, either confirming or correcting it.

Key-words: *theory of social action, convergence of linguistic expectations, divergence of actuations of linguistic roles*

1. Dialogicality and agency

Intersubjectivity, from which dialogue is born, is the fulfilment of the social aspect of language: the 'I' goes toward the 'You' performing its social function and enacting a communication strategy that implies choosing an interlocutor, a topic, a register, as well as all that pertains to interpersonal communication in presence, including the kinesic and prossemic aspects. With the use of communication technologies, what takes place in presence is "displaced at a distance".

If we start from the consideration that thinking, in its greater part, needs language in order to articulate itself, there goes the explanation of the reason why each language must be learned within a culture, thus allowing for the acquisition of everything that culture knows, individual and collective, personal and cultural (Morin 1989, 136).

If we accept the definition of agency given by Duranti (2000), we can follow, step by step, how it is performed: the control over one's own linguistic behaviour starts with conversation, the real crucial point of the first communicative approach because it activates the interlocutor's choice and this, in turn, allows the choice of

[1] Padua University, mariselda.tessarolo@unipd.it

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

who to speak to and about what. The communicative relation between interlocutors is dialogic and such communicative action will be assessed by the second interlocutor, who will ask him/herself: What does that mean? What will I answer? Have I understood correctly? The person performing the interlocutory action will ask him/herself: Have I been clear enough? Have they understood me? Language is, therefore, a social action, because its real existence is given precisely by the fact that the dialogic form is the quintessential communication.

Hence, language is an intersubjective event in which the passage from language as a system of signs to language in its intercultural use always takes place. The decision by the first interlocutor, who uses agency thus enacting the communicative action, shows a capability of judgement and discretion of choice in pursuing the intentionality implied by dialogicity: not even the person enacting it can foresee its final outcome. What is initiated this way is a play of social and cultural constraints and affordance, meaning the potential of use that may be perceived, that explains to each interlocutor what actions are to be performed.

Agency is both a capability of actors to enter into dialogue and a skill that may be acquired in the play of interactions with the contexts where the exercise of such skill is implied. In such setting of reciprocal influences, competence takes on an interpretive function relative to the contextual dimension to which meaning is to be attributed by activating the perception of one's own abilities and attitudes. However, it also stands as a factor of a wider system of relations in which dialogic action in general becomes possible (as well as conscious). Action and structure are two dimensions that affect and condition each other, and not two separate and independent entities. They take on different levels of importance in shaping social reality.

Focussing on agency in the approach with the other person means looking not only into the structural dimension where the communicative action is performed, for example educational and didactic, or into the cultures shaping the practices, or at the individual capability, but also at the individual and collective potential of the "professional" action of teachers; at the same time, we also need to consider how this may be translated into action (Aiello 2018). Agency, and therefore the human ability to act, is always subject to constraints of a social, cultural, and linguistic character, and all these constraints precede its achievement (Ahearn 2002, 19).

2. *Langue* as social institution and *parole* as individual fact

The speaker is able to adjust to the situation, even if he/she may never be certain to be understood by the other person or to have expressed him/herself comprehensibly: in the making of the dialogue between the I and the You, the uncertainty of understanding the other interlocutor always remains. This entails a

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

series of clarifications that lead to the continuation of dialogue. Action endowed with meaning is a topic of investigation for Weber, who understands social action as being directed to a value or a purpose (rationality is achieved in both cases). Weber (1968) highlights how the actor's agency is important. The actor's actions are generated by an ethics of conviction, that declares again a rationalization aimed at confirming the superiority and universality of one's action. Recalling that social action always involves intention by the agent (Weber 1948), every behaviour may be interpreted as value-rational, as purpose-rational or as both. Although this conclusion may seem a contradiction, it is actually a confirmation of the polytheism of values underlining the passage from the ethics of conviction to the ethics of responsibility (Tessarolo 2016, 85).

When a communicative subject – meaning an interlocutor – speaks, he/she uses the *langue*, that is the patrimony on which he/she draws; but this is done through language, which is the adjustment of the *langue* to what the subject wants to express. Like all social institutions, the *langue* has its own degrees of freedom. It reflects a balance between imposed tradition and free action by society. It is entirely dominated by the historical factor of transmission, so much so as to exclude any general and sudden linguistic change. The modifications of a language are not tied to the succession of generations; far from being superimposed one on the other like drawers in a piece of furniture, they fuse and interpenetrate; and each generation embraces individuals of all ages (Saussure 1967, 90)

The structure of language is rigidly determined and the speaker must follow the linguistic norms legitimized by the collectivity to which he/she belongs. Structure is tolerated, and not a rule to which all freely consent – something of which language provides the best proof of (Saussure 1967, 89). For all societies, language is actually a product inherited from previous generations, to be accepted as is. The only real object of linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom (Saussure 1967, 90). In language, the action of time combines with the action of social force that, over time, will show its effects inherent in the principle of continuity, which implies alteration, a more or less significant displacement of relations. All that is diachronic in the *langue* is not so in the *parole*. The seed of all changes is to be found in the *parole*: each change at the beginning is launched by a certain number of people before it acquires common use (Saussure 1967, 118).

Sensus communis is what everybody knows and is therefore intersubjectively shared. It is a set of frames of thought, representations, perceptive patterns that present cognitive and symbolic aspects used by the subjects at an implicit or pre-conscious level. It is not a collective unconscious, but rather knowledge incorporated in social practices and rules, knowledge that is present in the mind in a latent state that may be activated without the speaker realizing it (Sciolla 2007). Language forms a pivot between computation and cognition, between innate and

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

acquired. The predisposition to language (which was acquired philogenetically during the process of hominization) is innate in Homo Sapiens, but each language must be learned within a culture.

Our current time has seen a weakening of social bonds and relational networks due to individualization, even though this trend meets with significant resistance in actual facts. There are signals of concern in contemporary life that tend to elicit responses of an opposite sign. If we look at relational identity networks, meaning those that are able to offer a relational context to the individual that escapes instrumental dynamics because of their unstable nature, typical of our times and, consequently, able to incorporate precious resources (social capital) for each single subject (Bourdieu 1988), we see that the family is the link that favours the formation of individual identity and socialization processes. Ethnic groups operating within the globalised society also form extended networks that are meaningful for their ability to generate focussed trust. The possibility opens up for creating relations with other subjects upon bases that are not just instrumental, for the benefit of relational stability, allowing rapports to be built and transactions activated on the basis of forms and modes that would otherwise be inaccessible (Giaccardi and Magatti 2003, 125).

Languages are social institutions that live in the dialectic between tradition and innovation. From the moment a child begins to speak, he/she tells him/herself and others his/her own perception of the world. From that moment, one is exiled forever from a condition of immediacy and captured by an invented reality constructed in and by language. Subjectivity is an activity of a relational type, linguistic, narrative and reflexive. Subjectivity – and therefore narrative activity – is an evolutionary process. It is the context that evolves (Bateson and Bateson, 1989).

3. Expectations and linguistic actuations

Human behaviour is idiosyncratic; homogeneous behaviours are expected when social and environmental situations are diversified and when subjects' *desiderata* do not converge, except within culturally homogeneous – and therefore relatively small – groups. In reality, behaviours generally become diversified by enacting both the human desire of individualization, i.e. "being oneself", and the desire of homologation, i.e. "being like others" (Braga 1977). The different role theories show a convergence of linguistic expectations, which are social, and a divergence of actuations of linguistic roles, which on the contrary are individual expressions.

The same sociological theories on postmodernity interpret the flaws, hesitations, personal factors and incompleteness of individual performances as hints to the nature of the human process leading to what Durkheim (1971) calls

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

"effervescence", which is realized by not following the rules imposed by society. This characteristic results from "insufficient" social control and produces the feeling of disruption that, in turn, gives rise to the fear of anything that is not covered by norms; creativity itself, in order to be accepted, must be regulated.

Society reproduces through social structures and interlocutors (actors) represent a reproduction process organized according to time and space coordinates, a process by which a society creates the resources that are necessary for the organization of its members' social life, while these resources, in turn, are reproduced by the members of society themselves through the use made by speakers (Duranti 2000, 21). Social systems are therefore the media and outcomes of routine practices at the same time, within which the principle of duality of structure formulated by Giddens (1990) applies. In this sense, speaking is not only a medium to represent a reality that is independent of language. It is also a resource that is able to reproduce social reality, including power relations and consequantly relations of dependency. Thus the structure is the outcome of the reproduction of practices.

Theories do not necessarily reflect reality, but they are a way of organizing experience, and therefore of interpreting the world. Labov (1972) observes that the linguistic code applied by the speaker is not determined by the social class to which he/she belongs, but rather by the context in which communication takes place. It is an issue of differences in the use of the dominant language.

In a research focussed on the New York ghetto of Harlem, Labov verifies that local kids speak to each other with high linguistic virtuosity and that most of their sentences are grammatically correct, especially in informal speech, with a higher percentage for the working class than the middle class. Even the children in the ghettos, once the atmosphere of mistrust and embarassment is overcome, practise a rich and varied verbalization allowing them to express personal opinions and feelings. Children from the lower classes, then, are not "deprived" of language, but possess a language that partly differs from the one used at and required by school. As underlined in the theory of situated action, the speaker is able to use a series of adaptations allowing him/her to adjust to the situation.

Social psychologists also refer to the theory of situated action, whose starting point is not the adaptation of given information, but the changing relationship established by actors with their environments. The speaker identifies in the situation a number of opportunities that he/she exploits with his/her action, the outcome of which feeds back into the diagnosis of the initial situation, either confirming or correcting it (Mantovani 2003). This is true even if their overview of the situation is not clear or precise. So action is necessary to explore the environment, contrary to what happens in rational models of decision-making, where the subject is supposed to analyse the problem in order to evaluate it before taking action (Tessarolo 2016).

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

4. Flexibility of interlocutors and situated action

The historical production of languages shows that dialectality has a universal relevance that occurs unexpectedly. Dialect, therefore, demonstrates that the intrinsic potentialities of the language system are necessarily unidirectional. It is in diaphasia, i.e. in the choice of different types of mode of expression in relation to the circumstances of speaking (of communication or dialogue) that the condition for the manifestation of dialectality is fulfilled. Dialect, then, does not stand as a "mistake" because it is a displacement, a distancing from the model, or diaphasia in act. Dialect itself is subject to continuous variations and its change represents a way of mediating between the old demands and those imposed by contemporaneity. Therefore, the problematic nature is not due to the variability and dynamic aspect of dialectality, but to the supposed and demanded rigidity of language, as it emerges from the difficulties inherent in the definitions of standard language (Marcato 2014).

In situated action, actions may be considered as the simple execution of preexisting cognitive plans, which can never be fully anticipated because they are constantly changing. The theory of situated action rejects the idea that human beings decide and plan effective actions without taking account of situations. On the contrary, it is precisely in action that knowledge deepens and originates a practical experience called "expertise". The fact that – in the situated action – the circumstance leading one to act changes continuously explains the flexibility of interlocutors (actors) set in a context.

In the case of a choice of language between two varieties, the position may only be defined within the complex of the language, which is an intrinsic *continuum*; while the definition of dialect/dialectality, regardless of how and where it is applied, supposes in itself a discontinuity in respect of something else (Prosdocimi 2014, 16). In line with Coseriu (1973), Prosdocimi notes that the position of dialect and dialectality is not intrinsically autonomous, but related to a hegemonic language variety, and the variety in its turn is not related. Dialect may be considered a language variety if there is a reference language perceived as "exemplary model". In Italy not all dialects are related to the hegemonic language. Diglossia indicates the condition for the manifestation of dialectality, as it is the deviation from the exemplary model of the language to be taken as reference (Prosdocimi 2014, 18-19).

5. Conclusion

The *langue* is the social, collective, shared part of the language, external to the individual who cannot create it or modify it alone. It may be studied separately

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

from the *parole*. Its domain consists of signifiers as classes of phonations, and signified as classes of senses. The *langue* is homogeneous by nature, unlike language that, on the whole, is heterogeneous. There is collective inertia towards linguistic innovation: language is used by all, it belongs to the social mass, and this becomes a factor of preservation. But the language system is also an inheritance from an earlier time. If time provides continuity and stability on one hand, it also determines its changeability on the other hand. These two aspects are not in contradiction: when we speak of immutability, we do not indicate unchangeability but rather intangibility.

The Italian writer Meneghello, in his book "Libera nos a Malo" (1963/2011), observes that language moves like a current. Its movement is usually muted, it cannot be perceived because we are in it. But when someone who emigrated comes back, we can measure the distance from the point where he/she came ashore. The writer notes that when speaking with people coming back from Australia or America after ten or twenty years of absence, it feels like facing someone from another country or another time. Yet it is not their language that has altered, it is ours. It is as if words came back to their home country too: they are recognized with a strange feeling, often after some hesitation, and certain words even cause a little shame (Camilleri and De Mauro 2013, 19). Dialect, like every other language, changes, renews itself, lives the life of those who speak it.

Agency brings us back into a pluralism where every dialogic relation highlights the individuality of both interlocutors, so much so that pluralism – every pluralism – should be understood as the need to strenghen the skills of receptors to correctly situate the message and to critically interpret it. Therefore, pluralism does not configure as a form of tolerance, but as a form of understanding, and this is precisely where the marked difficulty of its practice is found. We agree that the difficulty is exacerbated by the fact of wanting to find at any cost those "laws" of social life that would lead all knowledge to be absolutely universal and necessary, in the words of Simmel quoted at the beginning of Boudon's book "The place of disorder" (1985).

References

Ahearn, Laura M. 2002. "Agentività/Agency". In *Culture e discorso. Un lessico per le scienze umane*, ed. by Alessandro Duranti, 18-23. Roma: Meltemi.

Aiello, Paola 2018. "Introduzione allo sviluppo professionale dei docenti. Ragionare sull'agentività per una scuola inclusiva." In *La pedagogia. Aspetti, temi, questioni,* ed. by Maurizio Sibilio and Paola Aiello, 1-4. Trento: Erikson.

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)

Bateson, Gregory and Mary Catherine Bateson. 1989. *Dove gli angeli esitano*. Milano: Adelphi.

Boudon, Raymond. 1985. *Il posto del disordine*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1992. *Risposte. Per un'antropologia riflessiva*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Braga, Giorgio. 1961. *Comunicazione e società*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Braga, Giorgio. 1977. *Per una sociologia della comunicazione verbale*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Camilleri, Andrea and Tullio De Mauro. 2013. *La lingua batte dove il dente duole*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

D'alonzo, Luigi, 2018. "Il lavoro inclusivo dell'insegnante in classe". In *Lo sviluppo professionale dei docenti*, ed. by Maurizio Sibilio, and Paola Aiello, 5-15. Napoli: EdiSES.

Coseriu, Eugenio. 1973. *Lezioni di linguistica generale*. Torino: Boringhieri.

Duranti, Alessandro. 2000. *Antropologia del linguaggio*. Roma: Meltemi.

Giaccardi, Chiara and Mauro Magatti. 2003. *L'Io globale. Dinamiche della società contemporanea*. Roma-Bari Laterza.

Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *La costruzione della società*. Milano: Comunità.

Labov, William. 1977. *Il continuo e il discreto nel linguaggio*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Durkheim, Èmile. 1971. *La divisione sociale del lavoro*. Milano: Comunità

Marcato, Gianna. 2014. "La vitalità dei dialetti in Italia tra crolli, ristrutturazioni, rivisitazioni". In *Le mille vite del dialetto*, ed. by Gianna Marcato, 47-62. Padova: Cleup.

Mantovani, Giuseppe. 2003. *Manuale di psicologia sociale*. Firenze: Giunti.

Meneghello, Luigi. 1963/2011. *Libera nos a Malo*. Milano: BUR

Morin, Edgar. 1989. *La conoscenza della conoscenza*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Prosdocimi, Aldo. 2014. "Dialetto/dialetti, koinè/Koinai. Ambito del significare e orizzonti del comunicare". In *Le mille vite del dialetto*, ed. by Gianna Marcato, 13-46. Padova: Cleup.

Saussure de, Fernand. 1967. *Corso di linguistica generale*. Bari: Laterza.

Sciolla, Loredana. 2007. *Sociologia dei processi culturali*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Tessarolo, Mariselda. 2007. "Lo spazio sociale". In *Questioni di spazio*, ed. by Laura Verdi and Mariselda Tessarolo, 13-83. Padova: Cleup.

Tessarolo, Mariselda. 2016. "Il linguaggio come pratica sociale". In *Le mille vite del dialetto* ed. by Gianna Marcato, 37-48. Padova: Cleup.

Tessarolo, Angela. 2016. "Politiche d'asilo ed etica weberiana". *Metis* 1: 81-88.

Weber, Max. 1968. *Economia e società*. Milano: Comunità.

Weber, Max. 2004. *La politica come professione*. Torino: Einaudi.

BDD-A32212 © 2020 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 20:51:03 UTC)