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Individually and Socially-based Understandings in Researching Professional Discourse

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Abstract
Scholars both in the West and in Asia have repeatedly observed that much theorizing on discourse phenomena by Western scholars has privileged explanations in terms of humans as individual beings, rather than in terms of humans as social beings. Key examples in the study of professional discourse are theories explaining face and politeness, with theories of human communication, leadership, and management similarly focused. Face, as one particular example, is a concept drawn from Asian discourse regarding how persons relate to one another, but which in the hands of Western scholars has been re-conceptualized as an attribute of a singular individual, rather than as a social property of persons-in-relationship-to-other-persons. Scholars both in the West and in Asia employ these Western theories in research on professional discourse (Bargiella-Chiappini *et al*., 2007), there being at present no prominent explanation that privileges explanations in terms of humans as social beings, or more productively, in terms of humans as dialectically both individual beings and social beings. Employing an individually-based account at the expense of a socially-based account is consequential in examining discourse because the way in which a scholar conceptualizes a phenomenon constrains the questions he or she addresses in research, the explanations he or she creates, and the applications of his or her findings.

Keywords: Professional discourse, individually-based account, socially-based account, face

1. Introduction

Scholars both in the West and in Asia have repeatedly observed that much theorizing on discourse phenomena by Western scholars has privileged explanations in terms of humans as individual beings, rather than in terms of humans as social beings. Key examples in the study of professional discourse are theories explaining face and politeness, with theories of human communication, leadership, and management similarly focused. Face, as one particular example, is a concept drawn from Asian discourse regarding how persons relate to one another, but which in the hands of Western scholars has been re-conceptualized as an attribute of a singular individual, rather than as a

social property of persons-in-relationship-to-other-persons.[1] Scholars both in the West and in Asia employ these Western theories in research on professional discourse (Bargiella-Chiappini *et al*., 2007), there being at present no prominent explanation that privileges explanations in terms of humans as social beings, or more productively, in terms of humans as dialectically both individual beings and social beings. In examining these issues more carefully, this article first develops a dialectical perspective on the link between the individual and the social aspects of being human beings; second, considers how theory relevant to understanding discourse is biased toward the individual aspects at the expense of the social aspects; third, provides examples from current theorizing; and fourth, examines the consequences of this bias in studying discourse in everyday and in professional contexts.

2. The Social and The Individual in Human Existence

Reflect for moment of two truisms about human existence. At every stage of life, individual human beings exist in social relationships with other individual human beings. One's birth as an individual being derives from the agency of two other human beings. Humans are nurtured from the earliest moments in close attachment to other individuals, particularly in families. Relatively soon children begin to interact with other individuals in neighborhoods, schools, and communities, learning to work and to play in groups and teams. As a person matures, he or she may find a place in a new family, and may develop a trade or profession, finding himself or herself to be a part of a new social organization. As persons do all of these things, they take their places as members of nations, societies, and cultures. In other words, to exist as an individual human being is to be at all times a social being, immersed in a diversity of relationships with other individual human beings.

However, even though persons are always social beings, at every stage of life human beings also exist and function as distinct, individual beings. One's birth physically embodies each person as a spatially separate, corporal entity. Virtually all of humans are capable of initiating vocalizations and physical movements at birth, apart from the instigation of others. Human beings are also each cognitively autonomous from others, in that so far as is known, one has direct and unmediated access only to one's own, individual perceptions, cognitions, and emotions. As individuals grow and develop over time, they identify the boundaries between their own perceptions, cognitions, and emotions and those of others. In so doing individuals develop an understanding of their own agency as an embodied being, apart from the agency of others. That cognition of oneself as an individual is sometimes referred to as one's identity. In other words, to exist as a social being is to be continually an individual human being, with physical and psychological bases for existing in the world that are distinct from those of other individual human beings.

[1] The term "Asian" is simply a convenience, not a suggestion that the diverse countries, cultures, and scholarly traditions of Asia are somehow unified as one. The term "Western" is similarly a convenience in identifying scholars and traditions of thought prominent in Europe, North America, and Australasia.

If one grants that human beings are always both social beings and individual beings, one is led to reflect on how what is individual and what is social in human existence are linked with one another. It is obvious on definitional grounds that existing as a social being presupposes the existence of two or more individual beings who interact with one another in some manner. The "social" aspects of the human experience therefore presuppose the existence of individual human beings who are drawn together in some sort of relationship. It is perhaps less obvious that on definitional grounds, existing as an individual with distinct physical and psychological bases for agency presupposes the existence of at least one other individual being with whom one interacts and from whom one is distinct. The "individual" aspects of the human experience therefore require developing distinctions among individuals who have been drawn together into some sort of social relationship. In other words, not only is human sociality dependent on individuals in nexus, but also human individuality is dependent on the nexus that is the social.

This entwining of the individual and the social aspects of human existence can be framed as a dialectic, but not in the sense of a Hegelian-Marxian dialectic of thesis and antithesis leading to synthesis. Instead, what is individual and what is social form a Yin and Yang dialectic, as in the familiar drawing of two co-existing but opposing elements that each contain aspects of the other and that at points merge into and become the other element. As in Baxter and Montgomery (1996, pp. 6-17), a Yin and Yang dialectic is neither a dualism nor a bipolar continuum because it involves two phenomena that mutually define one another, but that function in incompatible ways such that each negates the other. The two contradictory phenomena are always in tension, but are nevertheless unified because they function interdependently in an on-going, dynamic, and interactive manner. There is no drive to achieve balance between the two poles or elements, because to understand something as a Yin and Yang dialectic is to understand that both poles are always present to some degree, and that both must always be taken into consideration.

Considered as a Yin and Yang dialectic, then, functioning as a social being is distinct from functioning as an individual because social activities cannot be accomplished solely through the agency of one individual, but neither can they be accomplished in the absence of individuals. Conversely, functioning as an individual is distinct from functioning as a social being in that individuals can carry on many activities in isolation from others, although their existence as individual agents who can perform human activities has its basis in human sociality. In other words, to exist as a human being is to be always and inseparably both an individual and a social being.

3. Individually-based and Socially-Based Explanations

Understanding what is individual and what is social in human existence as a dialectic is not at all common. Scholarly explanations of human functioning in the life world generally treat what is individual and what is social as a dualism of two distinct phenomena, and one of the consequences of doing so is the prominence of two broad forms of explanation for human functioning. One of

these forms of explanation takes singular individuals to be the primary analytical unit, and accounts for human activity in terms of individual behavioral or psychological attributes like vocalizations, perceptions, intentions, or identities. If social phenomena are explained at all, it is as an aggregation of the attributes of individuals. Grice's (1957) influential explanation of non-natural meaning as the hearer's recognition of the speaker's meaning intention is a prime example, as is Searle's (1969) theory of speech acts, the only social aspects involved being the hearer's perception of the speaker's vocalization, and mutual, although individually-based, knowledge of felicity conditions.

The other prominent form of explanation takes macro-social entities to be the primary analytical unit and accounts for human activity in terms of properties of the whole like codes, registers, norms, or languages. Human social phenomena are explained in terms of the macro-social property acting upon or influencing the individual's behavior or psychology. Individuals who are influenced in basically the same manner by a given macro-social property enact the same behaviors or psychological patterns, and in so doing constitute a social entity. Whorfian linguistic relativity in the strong sense is perhaps the clearest example, with Bernstein's (1974) initial proposal of elaborated and restricted codes being another, although, as Eelen (2001) has very carefully argued, this form of explanation also underlies the Parsonian normativity assumed in current theories of politeness.

Distinguishing between these two broad forms of explanation is not a critique of Grice's, Searle's, Whorf's, Bernstein's, and other's accomplishments. Scholars create the best conceptualizations they can at the particular points in time and in the specific academic environments in which they work. However, both of these prominent forms of explanation can be seen as incomplete by reference to the dialectical perspective on the link between what is individual and what is social. Explaining why they are incomplete requires making a further distinction between what might be termed "weak" and "strong" explanations of social phenomena, where weak and strong are not used pejoratively to mean bad and good, but rather to distinguish among key characteristics of explanations of what is social in human existence. There a great many highly productive, but weak explanations of social behavior.

The weak/strong distinction rests on the distinction between summativity and non-summativity (Arundale 1999, p. 126; 2010, pp. 2079-2080; Arundale & Good 2002, pp. 124-125). Summative properties are the same as, or no more and no less than, the aggregate of the properties of some set of independent objects. For example, each chemical element has its own distinct properties, and a list of these properties for all the elements is a summative account of the elements. Non-summative properties are properties that arise as the components of a system interact with one another, reciprocally affording and constraining one another's functioning. Non-summative properties are distinct from the properties of the individual components of a system, either qualitatively or quantitatively. Common salt is a chemical compound with non-summative properties that are qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from those of either sodium or chlorine as elements. Because the non-summative properties of a system are distinct from

the summative properties, they cannot be explained in terms of or reduced to the properties of the components without leaving some property or properties of the system unexplained or unaccounted for. The properties of salt as a non-summative compound cannot be explained as a summative aggregation of the properties of its two independent elements.

Returning to the weak/strong distinction, then, weak explanations of social phenomena are summative accounts, whereas strong explanations are non-summative accounts. The prominent form of explanation that takes macro-social entities to be the primary analytical unit, and that explains social phenomena in terms of its macro-social properties acting upon or influencing the individual's behavior or psychology, provides a *weak* explanation of social phenomena. Such explanations take the non-summative properties of social phenomena like norms or languages as givens. They view these properties as instantiated within the individual human being, with the assumption that the aggregate of the individual instantiations explains the existence of the macro-social phenomenon. So for example, nearly every individual learns to speak a language, and the aggregate of this knowledge is assumed to account for the language's existence and operation.

However, there is a logical flaw here. Individually-based, summative accounts formally cannot explain how macro-social, non-summative phenomena arise. The aggregate knowledge of the individuals who speak a language formally cannot explain how a language as a macro-social phenomenon comes to exist in the first place, nor can it explain non-summative processes like language change, given the obvious stability of language structures over time. In contrast, strong explanations of social phenomena like norms or languages do not take their non-summative properties as givens, but instead provide explanations of the processes by which such properties arise in interaction among individuals.

It is because the prominent macro-social explanations of human functioning offer weak rather than strong explanations that they, together with individually-based explanations, can be seen as incomplete by reference to the individual/social dialectic. Explanations that are consistent with the individual/social dialectic must explicate individual as well as social phenomena, and in addition explicate not only how individual phenomena arise out of social phenomena, but also how social phenomena arise out of individual phenomena. Such explanations require understanding individuals as continually immersed in networks of specific micro-social interactions with other individuals, as well as understanding how that interaction generates both the non-summative, macro-social properties of human sociality, as well as the distinctions between persons that characterize human individuality.

Acknowledging the individual/social dialectic in research comes at the cost of increased complexity both in conceptualizing and in studying human phenomena. On one hand, acknowledging the dialectic requires a major re-conceptualization of social phenomena so as not to lose sight of their dependence on interaction among individuals. Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology is such a re-conceptualization in that it explains the

normative structure of society in the strong sense as reflexively and on-goingly constituted in normatively-guided interaction. That explanation is basic to the insights into everyday discourse developed in conversation analysis. On the other hand, acknowledging the dialectic also requires a radical re-conceptualization of individual phenomena so as not to ignore their enabling in social interaction, as in Arundale and Good's (2002) examination of "dyadic cognizing" as a non-summative cognitive phenomenon basic to language use. The payoff of acknowledging the individual/social dialectic is that these more complex conceptualizations are likely to better represent the evident complexity of human discourse phenomena, thereby avoiding the wasted research effort involved in employing over simplified or incomplete understandings.

4. The Privileging of Individually-based Explanations of Discourse

One might think that the dialectical linking of the social with the individual in human existence would be especially obvious to scholars who study discourse, because the nexus among people that is basic both to human sociality and to human individuality arises only in interaction among humans. But as noted at the outset, both Western and Asian[1] scholars have observed that much theorizing on discourse by Western scholars has privileged explanations in terms of humans as individual beings, rather than in terms of humans as social beings, or as dialectically both individual and social beings (cf., for example, Matsumoto, 1988; Rosenberger, 1992; Sampson, 1993; Stewart and Bennett, 1991). Key examples of this privileging in the study of both everyday and professional discourse are theories explaining face and politeness.

The concept of face derives directly from Asian discourse regarding how persons should and do relate to one another. In introducing Western anthropologists to collocations involving *lien* and *mien-tzu* in 1944, Hu makes evident that Chinese individuals' actions in attending to matters of face take place and have meaning only within particular webs of social relationships. Ho's 1976 study of both concepts likewise makes evident that face always involves individuals acting within specific social relationships. Nevertheless, much research on face within language pragmatics draws directly or indirectly on Goffman's 1955 re-conceptualization of face as an individual's understanding of the image others have formed of himself or herself, or in other words, as his or her self-image in public situations. Bargiela-Chiappini (2003, p. 1463) observes that "Goffman's ideal social actor is based on a Western model of [the] interactant, almost obsessively concerned with his [sic] own self-image." Because one's public self-image, like one's private self-image, is an individual's cognition regarding himself or herself, Goffman's explanation conceptualizes face as an attribute of a singular individual. Goffman recognizes clearly that the individual is surrounded by others who exert influence on him or her, and vice versa, but one's perception of other persons and of their influence is always and only an individual phenomenon. Nowhere in Goffman's account is the particular social relationship or the social organization among the persons involved employed as an explanatory factor (cf. Arundale, 2009).

More recently, both Locher (2008) and Spencer-Oatey (2007) have conceptualized face as a key aspect of a person's social identity. Both of these researchers understand one's social identity as arising in the social environments one inhabits, but both also understand the formation of identity as an individual's cognitive processing of what he or she perceives in the social environment. Neither researcher provides an explanation of identity in the strong sense as a non-summative phenomenon, socially constructed in interaction with others. Doing so would re-conceptualize identity in a manner consistent with the individual/social dialectic, providing an alternative to Locher's and Spencer-Oatey's understandings of social or relational identity as an individually-based attribute.

Certainly the most widely known conceptualization of face is Brown and Levinson's (1987) modification of Goffman's (1955) concept in explaining linguistic politeness. In place of public self-image, Brown and Levinson argue that face is better understood as an individual's social wants for autonomy from others on one hand, and for approval by them on the other hand. Maintaining one's own and other's face when either of these two wants is threatened becomes for them the key explanatory factor in an individual's choice among or interpretation of various verbal strategies. To maintain face by using such strategies is to be linguistically polite. Like public self-image and identity, however, social wants are individually-based attributes, which means that Brown and Levinson are consistent with Goffman and others in privileging explanations of face in terms of humans as individual beings, rather than in terms of humans as social beings, or as dialectically both individual and social beings.

What then of theories of politeness? Not all theories of linguistic politeness employ the concept of face, but as Eelen (2001, pp. 119-120; cf. 215) makes evident in his comprehensive overview, all of them manifest a conceptual bias towards explaining the speaker's behavior, rather than the hearer's evaluative work. Reversing the bias by explaining the hearer's evaluative work, or focusing on the speaker as well as on the hearer, would retain the view of politeness as an individually based phenomenon. The alternative, as Eelen argues, would be to explain politeness "as a truly interactional phenomena located in both positions and in neither at the same time," as would be the case in adopting the dialectical perspective. The bias toward explaining the speaker's behavior, as an individual apart from the hearer, stems at least in part from the prevalence of Gricean and Searlean perspectives in politeness research (p. 115). To their credit, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 48) explicitly note that their explanation of politeness failed to account for non-summative properties arising in interaction, although neither they nor others were at that time in a position to provide an alternate conceptualization.

Eelen (2001) also makes evident that all theories of politeness necessarily incorporate normative considerations, which suggests an explanation at least partially in terms of humans as social beings. As Eelen explains:

> The common-sense idea that politeness as a matter of socially shared norms is retained in the scientific models, where those norms are translated into social/cultural principles that

> guide language behavior. Norms are thus not relative to the individual, but become absolute, objective entities operating on the level of society/culture. Politeness is seen as a system of such absolute norms that needs to be internalized by the individual through socialization. (p. 187)

Eelen argues that current politeness theories implicitly adopt Parson's (1966, 1971) structural-functionalism, which holds that macro-social, non-summative phenomena like societal norms are central to human activity in the life world. More specifically, the consensus that is critical to a stable society rests on each individual acquiring these norms during his or her socialization, and henceforth enacting them because doing so is rationally in his or her best interest. On one hand, then, politeness theories acknowledge norms as essential non-summative properties of human sociality. On the other hand, they explain how norms operate in terms of individual-level cognition and behavior as controlled by external, macro-social properties. In short, politeness theories provide weak explanations of humans as social beings, and in this sense also privilege individually-based explanations of discourse phenomena.

Apart from face and politeness, the encoding/decoding model of communication that informs much current research on discourse is also an individually-based explanation. Arundale (2008, 2010, 2012) develops this argument in detail elsewhere, but at its core is the assumption that communication is a speaker's encoding of his or her meaning in linguistic form, followed by a recipient's decoding of the linguistic signal to recover the speaker's meaning. Successful communication results in identity between speaker and hearer meanings. Theories of discourse that implicitly or explicitly employ encoding/decoding models provide weak explanations because communication is reduced to the sum or aggregation of an individual speaker's encoding followed by an individual recipient's decoding. Such models cannot provide strong explanations of the social properties of communication because they are formally incapable of accounting for non-summative properties.

Theories of leadership and management likewise privilege individually-based explanations. From the start, theories of leadership have sought to explain the phenomenon in terms of attributes exhibited by the individual persons identified as leaders, as for example their risk-taking, commitment, competence, vision, and more. But these are weak explanations of what is manifestly a social phenomenon, for as the world's stage repeatedly reminds us, leaders and leadership simply cannot exist without followers and followership (cf. Kelley, 1992). Hoskin (2004) has defined "management" as ways "of getting people to get things done" (p. 750), and traced its invention to nineteenth century North American practices for tracking the "quantity and quality of human performance" (p. 755). Consistent with its roots in North American ideologies (Bargiela-Chiappini *et al*., 2007, p. 149), management theorizing for the most part explains how to get individual human beings to get things done, overlooking the truism that people cannot function as individual beings apart from also functioning as social beings.

5. Some Consequences for Research on Professional Discourse

In her observations in a 2007 forum highlighting the voices of Asian researchers studying business discourse, Bargiela-Chiappini makes evident that these scholars actively employ these theories of face, politeness, communication, leadership, and management, along with their Western colleagues. Scholars continue to use them in spite of the questions raised over the past decade on many different grounds regarding their viability. This paper raises further questions on the grounds that these theories privilege either individually-based, or weak socially-based explanations of discourse phenomena. With respect to the dialectic of the individual and the social, these theories can be seen to provide incomplete explanations because they fail to take into account both the individual and the social aspects of human existence. That failure has implications both for the conduct of research, and for developing new theories.

The Conduct of Research: Employing an individually-based or a weak socially-based account is consequential in research on discourse. In his careful study of the place of the researcher in the research process, Krippendorff (1970) has argued cogently that a researcher's conceptualization of a phenomenon both affords and constrains his or her choices at three key stages of inquiry: observing a phenomenon, generating and analyzing data regarding it, and interpreting the results of the analysis (Arundale, in press a). Conceptualizing face as an individually-based social want or aspect of identity, for example, affords one's observing of specific individual persons, generating and analyzing data on their cognitions, and interpreting their utterances in terms of their cognitive states. But conceptualizing face as individually-based also constrains one's recognizing and hence one's observing of specific social relationships among persons, one's generating and analyzing data on persons as embedded in evolving relationships, and one's interpreting of their utterances in terms of their emerging relational network. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the research of the Asian scholars in Bargiela-Chiappini *et al*.'s (2007) forum reveals "findings that do not easily fit existing western theoretical categories but call for the creation of new ones" (p. 132.)

As another example, conceptualizing politeness as an individually-based phenomenon both affords observing, gathering data, and interpreting a speaker's use of language as a strategic choice on his or her part, as in Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach, and constrains recognizing, observing, gathering data, and interpreting polite behavior as normative practice arising in specific social situations, as Asian scholars have repeatedly found to be the case (Bargiela-Chiappini *et al*., 2007, p. 134). With regard to conceptualizing communication, individually-based encoding/decoding accounts of communication both afford observing, generating data, and interpreting discourse as a set of independent utterances, and constrain observing, gathering, analyzing, and interpreting utterances in

discourse as a sequentially interdependent sequence (Arundale, in press a). Parallel affordances and constraints can be found for individually-based understandings of leadership and of management.

In other words, how a scholar conceptualizes face, politeness, communication, and more, constrains the questions he or she addresses in research on discourse, the interpretations he or she creates, and the applications of his or her findings. The affordances and constraints of conceptualizing face or politeness as an attribute of an individual may well entail simply not addressing social or relational factors. If such factors are addressed, the affordances and constraints of conceptualizing them in the weak sense may entail an interpretation that is incomplete because the social factors are seen simply as external forces or as individually embodied. Applying such research in providing a recommendation or developing an application may then be ineffectual because social or relational factors have been overlooked or inadequately addressed.

Developing New Theories: Acknowledging the dialectic of the individual and the social in human existence also affords and constrains the development of new explanations that avoid the shortcomings of current theories. One obvious constraint on new theories is that they must provide strong rather than weak explanations of discourse phenomena. However, in developing a strong explanation, a theorist could conceivably privilege a socially-based explanation in place of an individually-based one, simply because a strong explanation of the social focuses on explicating how social phenomena arise out of individual phenomena. Such an privileging would be problematic because an explanation of discourse consistent with the individual/social dialectic must also explicate how individual phenomena arise out of social phenomena, and in addition to explicating both the individual and the social phenomena that are involved.

In that light, consider briefly the early, explicit methodological decision on the part of key conversation analysts to eschew explanations of talk-in-interaction in terms either of cognitive states (Drew, 1995) or macro-social concepts (Schegloff, 1991). In light of the discussion above, that decision can be understood as a move to avoid the incomplete explanations provided by individually-based and weak socially-based accounts of discourse. In their place, conversation analysts have provided a strong socially-based explanation of talk-in-interaction. That explanation reveals how the micro-social phenomena of conversation arise as individuals place utterances adjacent to those of other individuals. The individual/social dialectic makes evident why these explanations cannot be ignored in developing new theories of discourse, but it also makes evident that ultimately any new theory must also explain how the utterances of individuals arise out of the

complex social processes involved in producing talk, together with how these individual and social processes operate. Clearly such new theories will not be simply modifications or summative combinations of the theories scholars currently employ (e.g., Arundale, 2010).

6. Conclusion

One's understandings of what is individual and of what is social in human existence are consequential in theorizing and in research on human discourse, whether that discourse takes place in everyday events or in professional contexts. Much scholarship to date has generated individually-based understandings of language use, and has constrained scholars in understanding discourse as socially-based, in the strong sense as a non-summative phenomenon arising in on-going interaction among individuals. Whether in the West or in Asia, scholars need to be fully aware of the conceptual frameworks they employ, in order that the theory they develop and the research they conduct not lose sight of human beings as dialectically not only individual beings, but also social beings.

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