

ON PROPER "IMPROPER ANSWER"

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1.0. In recent writings on generative semantics, great importance has come to be attached to the way context influences what is being said. Due to these investigations it has become apparent that many sentences hitherto considered semantically deviant turn to be quite proper, and fully and easily understood if they are looked upon not in an idealized speech situation but in their full situational context. Therefore it is no longer possible to establish unified sets of rules governing particular speech acts, predicting what can be considered a semantically proper or improper statement, command, question, answer to a question, etc. Trying to explain the various ways in which language operates some linguists formulated "rules of conversation" (cf. H. P. Grice, 1967, Gordon, D. and G. Lakoff, 1971, also Robin Lakoff, 1973a).

1.1. Robin Lakoff (1973a) states that we follow pragmatic rules in speaking just as we follow semantic and syntactic rules, and all of them must be part of our linguistic rules. There are two rules of pragmatic competence, namely: (1) Be clear and (2) Be polite. The rules of clarity have been worked out by Grice (1967) as rules of conversation. These are the following:

1. Quantity: Be as informative as required
Be no more informative than required
2. Quality: Say only what you believe to be true
3. Relevance: Be relevant
4. Manner: Be perspicuous
Don't be ambiguous
Don't be obscure
Be succinct.

Apart from these there exist, according to Robin Lakoff, three rules of politeness: (1) Don't impose, (2) Give options, (3) Make your interlocutor feel good

— be friendly. According to Robin Lakoff, Grice's rules of conversation are a subtype of the first rule of politeness, R1.

1.2. We are of the opinion that even these rules cannot handle all the cases of language use. For instance, the problem of how one should account for the linguistic phenomenon of Proper Answer seems quite difficult. By Proper Answer we understand a response to a question which fulfils the speaker's assumption that he will get a reply, as well as the presupposition of the question itself, which can be, loosely speaking, that the information included in the question is true.

If the speaker asks:

1. Are you hungry?

he expects the addressee of the question to state whether *he is hungry* or *he is not hungry*. This is, generally speaking, the way Yes — No Questions operate in a language. There may be some conversational implicature (cf. Grice, 1967) included in this question but we are going to discuss this in later sections of our article. Thus, one can say that with Proper Answers Robin Lakoff's R1, i.e., Don't impose, is violated; or one can even say that it has to be violated if the response is to be understood as Proper Answer. In the case of Yes — No Questions R2 — Give options operates along with R1, and thus neither of them is observed. The linguistic and pragmatic character of Yes — No Questions is such that they impose on the addressee what kind of response is expected. This is more strongly manifested by Disjunctive Questions, eg.:

2. Are you hungry or thirsty?

Similar remarks can be made about Wh — Questions. If one asks:

3. How did you get to the party?

one does not expect (3a) in reply:

3a. Yesterday.

The speaker violates R1 — Don't impose, but if he did not violate this rule he might as well not seek the information. If the speaker asks HOW, he cannot be satisfied if he gets WHEN in reply.

As for R2 — Give options, it can operate with WH-Questions only in the way that it allows the addressee to choose from all the members of a given Wh-set the one that is according to his knowledge of the world the true one.

1.3. The addressee can opt out in his reply, thus not fulfilling the speaker's request for information. (3a) is an example of a situation like this. Similarly, he can respond to (1) and (2) by (1a) and (2a), respectively:

1. Are you hungry?

1a. I don't know,

2. Are you hungry or thirsty?

2a. Both.

Responses like (1a, 2a, 3a) have come to be known in linguistic literature as Improper Answers. Within the large group of Improper Answers there have

been distinguished such subtypes as Evaluations, Evasions, Replies, etc. (cf. E. Iwanicka, 1976, and R. Lakoff, 1973b). In the present article we are interested in how these improper answers can be rendered proper providing they are looked upon not in a context-less prescriptive manner, but in their full social and situational context. We will contrast examples from English and Polish, and thus we will check whether the social and situational factors of a given speech situation have similar importance and consequences for understanding utterances in English and Polish.

2.0. Let us consider a simple question-answer situation:

4. Are you busy?

(4) constitutes a Yes — No Question. When asking it the speaker assumes that he will get a reply from the hearer in which he will state that either he is busy or he is not busy. Thus (4a) and (4b) will fulfil the speaker's expectations, while (4c) will not:

4a. Yes, I am.

4b. No, I'm not.

4c. It's none of your business.

(4a) and (4b) constitute proper answers to (4), while (4c) is an improper answer as it does not provide the requested information; it also violates R. Lakoff's "Be polite" rule. Similar observations can be made about Polish:

4'. Czy jesteś zajęty?

4a'. Tak, jestem.

4b'. Nie, nie jestem.

4c'. To nie twoja sprawa.

2.1.1. Let us now add context to this linguistic situation. Imagine that (4) is asked by a mother and (4c) is uttered by her child. (4) is a properly formulated question whereas (4c) is not only an evasion to the question, but is very rude as well. No mother could be happy about receiving a response like this.

2.1.2. Imagine now that A and B are good friends and they have quarrelled some time ago. A wonders if enough time had passed for them to be on speaking terms again and asks (4). If he receives (4c) as a response he will probably not be dissatisfied or offended. This seemingly incoherent sentence will carry vital information for him, one that he alternatively expected. He will learn that he still has to wait for a while until all the unpleasantness is forgotten. Notice that with this case it is difficult to predict whether the "be polite" rule is violated or not.

2.2.0. If a Polish mother learns from her child that it is not her business ("To nie twoja sprawa") to know if the child is busy or not she will feel offended and, of course, she will still not know if the child is busy or not.

2.2.1. If a Pole is trying to start a conversation with his friend with whom he had an argument a little while previously and he hears that it is none of his

business ("to nie twoja sprawa") to take an interest in whether the friend is busy or not, he realizes that he has to be a bit more patient before things look up for them again.

3.0. As has been said, one usually asks a question because he wants to know "whether S or not-S", or WHO, or WHY, or WHEN, etc., somebody did something. How would, then, a speaker react if to his question:

4. Are you busy?

the addressee responds:

5. I'm reading a book.

According to R. Lakoff's rules of conversation concerning Questions, the speaker assumes that he will get a reply. (5) is a reply, but it is certainly different from the already discussed (4a) and (4b). From the paradigmatic character of the question — answer relation it is clear that (5) does not fulfil the speaker's expectations. Depending on the situational context in which this exchange of sentences occurs (5) can perform various functions.

3.1.0. If the conversation is, for instance, between a mother and her child, or between two friends, then (5) will, most probably, be treated on a par with (4b), i.e., "No, I'm not busy". To justify our point we would like to remark that (5) very often appears in a slightly modified version as:

5a. No, I'm reading a book.

5b. Well, I'm reading a book.

The full reading for (5a) is "No, I'm not busy and that is why I'm reading a book".

(5b) has a different gloss. The introductory "well" marks the response as hesitant. The hearer leaves it for the speaker to decide whether what he is doing can be considered being busy or not. The reading for (5b) is something like the following: "I'm reading a book now but if you want me to do something else I may do it". In our speech situation, after saying (5) the interlocutor is usually requested or told to do something for the speaker.

3.1.1. The above remarks cannot be by any means considered schematic. Notice what happens if the the interlocutor utters (6) instead of (5), the context being the same:

4. Are you busy?

6. I'm doing my lessons.

With most mothers and fathers, and friends (if they are good friends), (6) is no longer equivalent to (4b), "No, I'm not busy". On the contrary, it is always understood as "Yes, I'm busy". We have just overheard a conversation in Polish between a mother and her 10-year-old son:

4'. Czy jesteś zajęty?

6'. Nie, właśnie odrabiam lekcje.

7'. Odrabiasz lekcje? To dlaczego mówisz, że nie jesteś zajęty?

(4. Are you busy?)

6. No, I'm doing my lessons.

7. You're doing your lessons? Why do you say, then, that you're not busy?).

(6), and (6'), carry different conversational implicatures for A — the speaker, and for B — his interlocutor. For B, saying (6) is implicating that he is not busy, while A's evaluation of the implicature is the opposite, i.e., "B is busy". In this apparent clash of implicatures the party that wins is this that is of higher social rank and has the right to impose his or her decisions upon the other party.

4.0. Conversations in natural language seem to disobey the pattern of correctness linguists would like to impose on them. Consider another example of a question-and-answer exchange:

4. Are you busy?

8. Why do you ask?

Again, if it occurs between a mother and her child, or between a brother and a sister, or two brothers or two friends — generally speaking between people who know each other well and who are on friendly terms, the speaker usually does not insist on eliciting from the hearer whether he is busy or not but continues to explain why he asked the question. He can say for instance:

9. I just wanted to know if you're busy or not.

9a. I want you to go shopping.

9b. I wondered if you could go shopping, etc.

Robin Lakoff's rules of politeness are observed here, therefore the conversation can be continued.

4.1. Compare the same in Polish:

4'. Czy jesteś zajęty?

8'. Dlaczego pytasz?

9'. Po prostu chciałam wiedzieć, czy jesteś zajęty czy nie.

9a'. Chcę, abyś poszedł po zakupy.

9b'. Zastanawiam się, czy mógłbyś pójść po zakupy.

Neither in English nor in Polish (8) and (8'), which are improper with respect to the idealized, context-less classification into proper and improper answers to questions, violate the rules of conversation by stopping it, cutting it short, etc. They carry conversational implicatures with them which are understood by the interlocutors, thus enabling the conversation to be continued.

4.2. However, if the same question — answer situation occurs between a boss and his employee, saying (8) can, and usually is, considered inappropriate, for it violates the rules of a conversation between two persons, one of whom is of higher social rank than the other. It is in a context like this that the notion of a proper answer to a question applies. (4a) and (4b) are proper answers, whereas (8) is improper, for no-one's request for information addressed to the hearer can be fulfilled by another request for information, and we have not

yet considered the sociolinguistic consequences of uttering (8) instead of (4a) or (4b).

4.2.1. It is in a situation like this that Grice's rules of conversation have to be observed. According to R. Lakoff, they have to be observed whenever the conversation is formal, as are, for example, business conversations or academic lectures.

5.0. We would like to provide yet another example of how a response to a question can be proper in one context and improper in another. Consider the following:

4. Are you busy?

10. Do you want me to do something?

where (10) is uttered in response to (4). This exchange of utterances illustrates what often happens between people who know each other well. There exists some sort of close personal relationship between the speaker and his addressee. Therefore the latter hearing the question assumes that the only reason for the speaker to ask it has been because the speaker wants him to do something. This information is clear in advance and that is why, instead of answering (4), he immediately inquires about the speaker's intention in asking (4). (10) often appears in an even stronger form as:

10a. What is that you want me to do?

Where the personal relationship is of very strong type, as, for instance, between a parent and his child, or a wife and a husband, the question-response exchange can even take this form: the hearer sees the speaker entering the room with a shopping bag in her hand and asking:

4. Are you busy?

and the response she gets is:

11. O. K., I'm going shopping. What am I to buy?

It might not have been the speaker's intention to elicit from the hearer a response like (11), but when she gets it she is not dissatisfied with it for, in fact, the real reason for asking (4) is to make the addressee go shopping.

5.1.0. Here again the conversational implicature operates. The rules of clarity and politeness are observed and the result is the expected one.

5.2. If sentence (11) or (11a) is uttered in our second context, i.e., by an employee (B) to his boss (A) it strongly violates the rules of conversation imposed by the context. The main violation occurs here on the level of pragmatic competence. First of all, the "Be polite" rule is not observed. Consequently, B is not clear about whether he is willing to do any job for A or not. In effect he sounds rude and A has all the reasons to feel offended. In this speech situation, apart from violating the semantic requirements of the question-answer relation, sociolinguistic rules are also violated.

5.3. Again, as in case of previous examples, a parallel analysis can be carried out for Polish. Compare:

4'. Czy jesteś zajęty?

10'. Czy chcesz, abym coś zrobił?

10a'. Co mam zrobić? (Co chcesz, abym zrobił?)

If (10) or (10a) is uttered by a husband to his wife there is nothing surprising about it, and nothing deviant, of course. After all, people who know each other well and understand each other well can communicate without using words. There are situations where looks and gestures can successfully substitute verbal acts of communication.

5.4. As for the second context, i.e., a conversation between a boss and his employee whom he sees or talks to for the second or third time only, it is very improper for the employee to respond by (10') or (10a'). The only admissible type of response here is (4a') or (4b'), i.e., a "proper answer" for a speech situation like this. Notice, too, that when the hearer responds to:

4'. Czy jesteś zajęty?

by mere (4a'):

4a'. Tak, jestem.

it may also be received as an ill-will response. If one is to provide a full positive answer to a question asked by someone who is of far higher social rank than the addressee himself, he has to explain why he is busy. The boss asks (4) not just because he wants to learn whether his employee is busy or not, but because he wants to give him some assignment. Thus the answer expected in a situation like this is something like the following:

4'. Czy jest pan zajęty?

4d'. Tak jestem. Właśnie przepisuję pańskie listy.

5.4.1. Exactly the same can be observed in English:

4. Are you busy?

4d. Yes, I am. I'm just typing your letters.

If instead of (4d) the interlocutor said (4a), i.e., "Yes, I am", the speaker would immediately ask (4e):

4e. What are you doing?

and only after receiving an answer to this question he would be able to decide whether the hearer should continue his present job or whether he could be given some other assignment.

6.0. The present article is intended as a small contribution in support of that aspect of the theory of generative semantics which stresses the importance and necessity of discussing various linguistic phenomena within the broad situational context in which they occur. We have tried to show that a number of responses would appear semantically deviant with respect to the speakers' assumptions and presuppositions were not context taken into consideration. The examples we have provided may not be the best ones nor the most crucial ones, but they can all be found in the languages we use.

The analysis we have carried out for Polish and English has shown that

the two languages are similar not only with respect to their syntactic and semantic structures but also in the way the speakers of these two languages use them in various contexts to respond to questions.

6.1. We would like to point out again that language is used by people in ever-changing situations and if a linguistic theory attempts to provide a thorough description of a natural language and the way it is used, it cannot forget about the importance of context. Generative semantics is the theory which has postulated the importance of context and description of language use as opposed to language as such, but even within this theory many investigations are carried out towards idealized speaker — hearer exchange of utterance instead of making them pragmatic studies.*

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