PERFORMANCE OR COMPETENCE? SOME REMARKS ON THE LIMITATIONS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

MARIA Z. ZIÓŁKOWSKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The growing interest in the stretches of language longer than a sentence has resulted in a vigorous development of discourse analysis and the research has already produced interesting insights into the organization and meaning of talk. The increasing number of publications, however, testifies to the enormous task facing the analysts of verbal interaction. Just as conversation is an on-going, open-ended process (cf. Garfinkel 1967), so does the investigation of talk appear to be an unaccomplished achievement and as noticed by Coulthard and Brazil (1979) most descriptive problems remain to be solved. It seems, however, that the biggest problem of all is that of a precise definition of the subject of research, namely, whether it is competence (in terms of the invariant rules of discourse) or performance (their actual application) that the linguist hopes to describe? And, as will be argued below, if this does not seem to be the case, what chance is there for a discourse analyst to achieve even a moderate level of a rigorous description?

The dichotomy between form (sometimes referred to as *knowing* — albeit unconsciously — the system) on the one hand, and function (or *doing*, i.e., using the system in actual sociocultural situation) on the other, is perhaps the fundamental distinction in linguistics and reflects a basic thesis: that "a process has an underlying system — a fluctuation an underlying constancy" (Hjelmslev 1961: 10). This distinction also appears to be most unfortunate. All attempts at a differentiation between a process and a system, or else between competence and performance, or form and function, assume the existence of a psychological abstract entity somehow independent of, not fully responsible for, and yet (as is rather reluctantly admitted) extractable only from, speech. The search for the ideal linguistic forms and the ensuing avoidance of the allegedly irrelevant speech phenomena resulted in delicate operations on

decontextualized, highly idealized data which had little in common with actual utterances. Although it seems that no linguistic analysis can avoid some degree of idealization (as pointed out by Widdowson, 1979, even the ethnomethodologists deal with a product, not a process) the level to which the formalists carried the divorce between the data and their concrete context resulted in the loss of meaning (in terms of socially significant variations, cf. Halliday 1971), and few explanations as to the organization and meaning of the actual speech were offered because it was the system that was recognized — and described — as the principle of organization. None of the influential formal theories (if such a simplification is allowed) satisfactorily explained the nature of the relationship between the two. Also, the concentration on the abstract system has blinded the linguists to the truth that whatever its structure, and whatever Idea lies behind the imperfect realization, language is first of all used by the speech community as a means of communication and like any other kind of social behaviour (Goffman 1964) talk is used by the speakers for communicating indefinite (cf. Halliday 1971) meanings about the social, psychological and natural world. Also, meaning is created interactively and cannot be accounted for by formal features alone; it is both retrospective and prospective (Garfinkel 1967) and is yielded by the combined effort of the participants. Even if, as will have to be admitted, the competence/performance opposition is unavoidable, if only because it makes the task of linguistics considerably easier (and considerably weakens the claim to a complete description of language) the conviction that this dichotomy reflects the nature of language should be dispensed with. Using Hjelmslevian terminology one may say that form and function are solidary and language as such is a solidarity. First of all, they are such in virtue of manifestation: the system is recoverable only through its realization. Secondly, the system embraces the realization as much as the realization embraces the system and Halliday's remark that language is what it is because of the demands made on it by its users seems to be one of the most true statements about language ever made (cf. Halliday 1971). Language is a social phenomenon and a social product which means that the study of form cannot be separated from talk. As pointed out by Tyler (1978), form is the enemy of meaning.

With the advance of sociolinguistics a redefinition of the subject-matter and the objective of linguistic study was required, but although the subject-matter of description became the entity hitherto known as parole, it was the knowledge behind use that was put forward as the goal of research. The notion of communicative competence importantly broadened the scope of the analysis but it essentially repeated the old distinction, the difference being that of degree, not of kind. Embracing both the knowledge of the formal system and the knowledge of the social rules of its use, communicative competence does not — and was not intended to — account for the actual execution, or performance, which in Hymes' opinion is a more complex entity involving the competence of other speakers and the properties of the speech events (Hymes 1972). Thus again the problem remains unsolved — how to account for performance? And, consequently, what should be regarded as deviant in talk? What set of social and formal rules decides upon the acceptability of talk? It should be noticed that Hymes amended his notion of competence by indicating its *dynamic* character exemplified by the shifting judgements of the native speakers on what is socially appropriate, and therefore at what point of the grammatical continuum the choice can be made (cf. Hymes 1974). These judgements would relate to the surface sociolinguistic rules (rather than to the interpretive procedures involving the sense of social order and the "common knowledge", cf. Schutz 1967, 1969; Cicourel 1973) and in this sense organize performance. In such case, however, setting up the competence/performance distinction seems unnecessary and superfluous.

This was noticed by Halliday who apparently alone among the linguists opposed the knowing/doing dichotomy indicating that language, as a kind of social behaviour, is a form of behaviour potential (linguistically a *meaning potential*) defined in terms of culture, and not — as in case of competence — in terms of mind. The expectancies of what the speaker *can mean* enable the hearer to understand what he *means*; in other words, the potential and the actualized potential are of the same abstract order and can illuminate each other (cf. Halliday 1971). Halliday claimed that his approach avoids the "unnecessary and misleading" dichotomy and although it is not at all clear in what respect his concept — apart from the intuitively attractive terminology — differs from that of Hymes, one cannot but agree with his opinion that distinguishing between "knowing" and "doing" is a major drawback of Hymesian notion, and, one might add, of linguistics altogether.

However, the immediate question is whether even the best informed analyst can, or is able to, fully describe the meaning potential with all its social, cultural, biographical and situational contexts involved. If talk is an open-ended process with meaning both retrospective and prospective, the chances for a complete description — not to mention invariant rules of discourse — are, to put it mildly, somewhat slender. These questions are contingent on the problem of whether the text purely as a process, or as a product involving extratextual information, should be the subject-matter of investigation (cf. Widdowson 1979). The apparent conclusion would be that language — notably in its functional aspect — would yield to description only after the extinction of the last of its users. The concept of language as social behaviour has made its study sensitive to all ills affecting other social sciences (cf. Schutz 1967, 1969). It seems, therefore, that discourse analysis cannot but offer only

tentative rules of discourse (but see Labov and Fanshel, 1977, for an opposite view), both in terms of structure and meaning of talk. Despite the sheer impossibility of accounting for meaning, we intuitively feel that there must be some system of rules organizing performance — otherwise communication would be seriously handicapped, if not simply impossible.

In view of the above-mentioned limitations the best that the analyst can hope for is to formulate a reasonable but only approximate discourse competence. All those investigating language must realize — and include in their calculations — the fact that their knowledge about this dynamic, living mechanism will be always imperfect and tentative. What is needed, in fact, is a certain humility. Linguists cannot boast of a total description, not even consider a future possibility of one. The accepted notions of linguistics — such as "competence" — should be redefined in terms of a reduction of their all-embracing generality. In the opinion of the present author, only if by the concept of a "sociolinguistic competence" will be understood a simplified, speculative and rough sketch of the "invariant rules of discourse" does the competence/performance dichotomy have a raison d être, and also does offer a set of concepts necessary for sheer manageability of the subject-matter — i.e., talk — and attainability of the objective — i.e., the description.

Thus, unfortunate as it may be, the (amended) competence/performance dichotomy cannot be avoided, if only because of its usefulness for theoretising about language behaviour. Also, it provides the indispensable constants in the Heraclitean flux of speech. The usual objections raised by the sociolinguists to de Saussure's and Chomsky's rejection of *doing* from linguistic investigation point out that both dealt with abstract constructs having little in common with the actual use of language in a speech community. And yet it must be admitted that both were right to some extent and that *doing* — understood precisely as a concrete, individual execution of the speaker's knowledge of rules (both of grammar and discourse) cannot be described and so far has not been attempted. It is significant that when the investigators try to account for verbal interaction, they inevitably look out for rules (cf. Searle 1969, 1979; Labov and Fanshel 1977; Burton 1981), structures (cf. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Coulthard and Montgomery 1981), or else organizational principles (cf. Sacks et al. 1978; Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Schegloff 1979) — in other words, they attempt to define the speaker's *discourse competence*.

It seems obvious that only competence (in its amended sense) can be described; not only because it is the task of linguistics, like that of every other science, to find a pattern in the chaos, but also the data the sociolinguists deal with (ethnomethodologists included) are products, not processes. Although admittedly the level of the idealization of data derived from a social matrix is lower than that in formal linguistics (if only because the phenomena investigated are of social origin, not abstract constructs of the analyst's brain), a linguistic text, as pointed out by Halliday (1971), is an idealized construction, no matter whether it was originally invented, elicited or recorded. But is there a need to separate the two kinds of the rules of knowledge — i.e., the rules of knowing *how* to speak in terms of the (presumed) grammaticality defined by the formal system, and the rules of knowing *how-when* to speak in terms of acceptability and relevance defined by the sociocultural norms? At the present moment there seems to be a tendency to set up a *dichotomy of competences*, one for mentalist use, the other for social use. Widdowson's use and usage is a case in point (1979). He introduced the notions of *usage* (pertaining to the speaker's knowledge of the grammatical system) and of *use* (relating to the knowledge of an ideal performance), each with a set of rules. The actual *doing* of language would involve the implementation of certain procedures on the part of the speaker: (1) *cohesion procedures* which govern the propositional development and realize the relationship between the speaker's procedures and the rules of usage, and (2) *coherence procedures* which account for the illocutionary development and realize the relationship between the speaker's procedures and the rules of use. Thus, apart from the ideal knowing and the ideal doing, actual doing is accounted for by introducing the concept of procedures. This seems to be the case of multiplying beings beyond necessity, because procedures intuitively appear to belong to the competence of the individual speakers rather than to the actual "doing" of language, even if therein manifested. More importantly, such a conception of a "doubled" competence seems to be misguided The tremendous significance of the notion of communicative competence or, better still, of the meaning potential, lies in the fact that both express the impossibility of separating the rules of use and the rules of usage; that, as has already been mentioned, language has evolved according to the demands of its users and if it is as it is then there is a need for it to be as it is (Halliday 1971).

As pointed out by Stubbs (1981), a description of discourse competence poses problems which do not appear in the description of phonetic and grammatical correctness. There seem to be no limits to what the speakers may judge as acceptable and nondeviant in a certain sociocultural context. On the other hand, there are clearly rules of well-formedness in discourse, related to the function of the utterance interpreted by the participants in terms of the topical structure and to its position in the sequence. The function of an item is to set up expectations and predictions about what most probably will, or should, follow. The speakers usually do their utmost to see the contributions to the preceding (and not only) utterances as relevant: in other words, maintaining the coherence of discourse is the basic orientation of the participants' interactive procedures (although irrelevance is always one of the speaker's options, cf. Coulthard and Brazil 1979). Again, whether the expected will follow or not is a matter of social significance — meaning is essentially related to the

predictive assessment of an utterance, and failure to provide a relevant item will be significant by its absence (cf. Sacks 1972, Schegloff 1972). Garfinkel (1972) pointed out that in order to grasp the meaning of an utterance it is essential to recognize not only *how* the person spoke but *that* he spoke as well, in other words, that not only the speech act but the action of speaking, the fact that the person chose to speak, is meaningful. Thus, apart from the ultimate indeterminacy of the relevance of the successive contributions, it is also because of the "to speak or not to speak" option that the rules of discourse, trying to describe the discourse competence, can only be stated in terms of what "the speaker knows about what can be expected to occur" (Stubbs 1981). Weighed against the Hjelmslevian empirical principle (cf. Hjelmslev 1961) the description, therefore, cannot claim to be an exhaustive one, while the requirements of self-consistency and simplicity (in view of the limited information about the total speech event) are simply empty. Consequently, it must be realized that language (understood as a totality, after the manner of de Saussure's langage) cannot be fully described, because at the last instance relevance is closely associated with meaning in terms of the shared knowledge of the participants, which, even if attainable to some extent, can never be fully shared by the analyst.

The observations put forward in the present article do not, it is hoped, appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, it was suggested that the divorce between form and function has established false premises for linguistic analyses and has considerably impoverished our understanding of what language is. It was also argued that with the linguistic studies embracing a higher level of language — the level of discourse (cf. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) — a total, scientific description of linguistic phenomena — alike to all social events — does not appear possible. Consequently, it should be realized that the scope of linguistic investigation is limited and that the description itself is only a tentative one. On the other hand, it appeared that the notion of a competence at all levels of linguistic study is unavoidable — not as much as an object and a goal, but rather as a necessary simplification, the only possible approximation to our understanding of the working of language. But then, although the analyst is never fully able to account for the meaning of talk at all levels of abstraction (cf. Labov and Fanshel 1977), it should be pointed out that the shared knowledge of the participants of a verbal exchange has its limits as well and sooner or later they will find themselves in a no-man's land. Therefore, allowances for the inevitable glossing must be made at all levels: for the hearer vis-à-vis the speaker's utterance (which may well be a blessing in disguise: knowing what the other person "really" means may prove, as indicated by Labov and Fanshel, 1977, rather uncomfortable); for the analyst vis-à-vis his data; and, last but not least, for a discourse analyst vis-à-vis the objective of his investigation.

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