

Inter-Texting Cultures during Pandemic(s): A Pragmatic Approach and Beyond

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Abstract

Pandemics are characteristic of both The Roaring 20s, with 1920 being the aftermath of the Spanish flu, and 2020s being the onset of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. In such a case, pragmatics (along socio- and psycho-linguistics, discourse analysis, behavioural and mass psychology, and NLP only in the latter '20s) is changing as we speak (literally!), forcing us to either adapt or no longer be an active participant in a speech event. We are granted a rare, even if unfortunate, opportunity to witness change in the very fabric of speech acts. Both the linguistic (or the verbal) and the extra-linguistic (or the nonverbal) are now facing tremendous pressure from people living in isolation and from restrictions imposed by authorities, which have resulted in extensive changes in context and in the entire process of communication. Yet, the pandemic has proved, without a shadow of a doubt, that people crave human interaction and need to inter-text their cultures, their beliefs, their realities, and ultimately themselves to (the) others, in a struggle to avoid alienation and anxiety, to avoid becoming 'the other.' Hence, both in the 1920s and in the 2020s, we notice a shift from cultural intertexts to everybody inter-texting their cultures as their only means of communicating themselves.

Keywords: *pragmatics, context, communication, change, adaptability*

Originally, I had thought of a somewhat different topic to tackle for this article - that is, before I laid eyes on what the editor-in-chief had in store for this issue. What she had envisioned this time made parts of my research and interests and, why not, vision, click into place after bits and pieces had spent some time drifting through my mind, not finding one another. Just because the perfect opportunity had not yet presented itself. The first thought that came to my mind when I was trying to grasp the Roaring '20s in the present, the 2020s, was that we are roaring in silence and isolation now. We have been, for some months now, since the world came under attack from an invisible, microscopic, enemy that forced us all into

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lockdown. We are the quarantined roaring in silence and isolation, for our own sake and to protect the others.

The 'funny' thing is that, if you think of it from a historical perspective, the 1920s were quite similar in terms of the socio-economic and medical background. Well, the background that a linguist has access to and manages to understand, as I would not want to start an argument with fellow historians and economists who undoubtedly know better. It is just that, from the point of view of pragmatics, discourse analysis, socio- and psycholinguistics, people experienced almost the same scenario. 1920 means the aftermath of the terrible Spanish flu, people lived in lockdowns back then as well, and they had to wear masks everywhere, even when they were allowed out, in the streets. Does it sound familiar to you? It sure does to me.

As we are learning to cope with this full-blown SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, I just could not help noticing the similarities in context when comparing and contrasting the two sets of '20s:

- We have to obey the same social distancing rules, that are only meant to protect us;
- We all share the same fear of contagion, when faced with a ruthless biological enemy that we have no defences against for now;
- We see the same image of locutors and interlocutors alike: an impersonal, everybody-looks-the-same masked face that creates a feeling of alienation both from the others and from the self;
- We share, to a smaller or greater extent, the same alienation and anxiety mix in isolation.

When you put all these together, and you remember that, in a nutshell, pragmatics is language in context, you may even conclude that it feels like you are becoming 'the other,' especially if you keep comparing and contrasting your life before the pandemic to the one you are living now.

However, there is one very important distinction to be made today, as contrasted against the 1920s: electronic communication is now everywhere. Think of smart phones, e-mailing, all sorts of applications and platforms, a wide range of social networks, and other such things that I am not really good at (I have reached the conclusion that I must possess some kind of DNA disturbance that literally repels technology, as we must both compromise to get along). The mere existence and availability of such

technology today has changed people's response to a previously similar situation, but similar only up to this point.

This is the part of our modern world during this SARS-CoV-2 pandemic where I can see cultural intertexts shifting towards inter-*texting* cultures, because this is precisely what we are all doing: we are texting instead of engaging in face-to-face human interaction. We are texting information, we are texting our feelings, we are texting our humour, our cultures... We are texting who we are.

I am quite positive (couldn't resist the pun) we are witnessing the emergence of a new niche in linguistics, particularly pragmatics, discourse analysis, socio- and psycho-linguistics, branches that go beyond the written and into the intended, into the realm of the invisible meaning, of the under- and over-stated, into the kingdom of the mighty context.

And context has definitely changed for many of us. Some can only communicate in writing, not possessing the technology or the skills to do more than that, and this may very well enhance alienation and anxiety. Others manage to resort to video communication as well, which makes them perhaps less alienated and anxious, but they feel the impact of isolation nonetheless.

A novel manner of communicating is emerging, as people come up with new ways of communicating ideas, thoughts and feelings under any sort of electronic form exclusively, but especially craving to communicate the self. This is because in communicating yourself to others, you are also reinforcing that very self to yourself, which allows for less alienation to creep in.

What is more, people are indeed making efforts, walking the extra mile to have their message received and decoded, either by changing the verbal, or the nonverbal, or the speech event itself. It seems to me as if we were now applying Roland Barthes's text distinction between the *lisible* (readerly) and the *scriptible* (writerly) to conversation and communication in general: if wanting to achieve successful communication, no actor is passive any longer, but they are actively joining efforts in conveying their own stories and histories. In conveying themselves to the world.

This effort is even more commendable as fear of contamination has changed fundamental concepts in communication, impacting the same branches of linguistics mentioned earlier on, as people shy away from direct face-to-face communication, thus altering the very fabric of speech acts. Your interlocutor, if not on screen during a video call, is now always

wearing a mask that no longer allows you to read micro-behavioural indicators that have always benefited the perlocutionary. If indeed during a video or, even worse, just audio call, you are totally dependent on the context of that particular communication, shared knowledge, intonation and tone of voice of your interlocutor to retrieve the elusive invisible meaning that keeps pragmatics alive.

It is not only pragmatics which is affected by this pandemic, but other sciences as well, and their impact on language is undeniable. If we consider behavioural and mass psychology and their close connection with psycho- and socio-linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis (CDA, i.e. critical discourse analysis, in particular), we cannot help acknowledging the influence of the extra-linguistic on communication. Although both the verbal and the nonverbal are under tremendous pressure nowadays, given the circumstances, it is the absence of the latter that hinders meaning recovery. We just cannot rely on behavioural indicators to help us retrieve meaning, especially the invisible part of meaning, when our interlocutors wear masks or are partially on a screen, where we cannot resort to body language interpretation to get the entire, or, why not, the real message. Thus, the perlocutionary is seriously affected and manipulation is much more possible on the part of the locutor, leaving the interlocutor with fewer resources to retrieve the genuine message hiding behind the linguistic.

In this respect, such a situation hinders Grice's concept of implicature, as the receiver of the message or the hearer finds it more difficult to perform reasonable inferencing. At the same time, Grice's principle of cooperation between speakers has to rely on a new array of elements, in order to contribute to successful communication (1975).

If we go even further, into sociolinguistics, we notice that we may even tackle the concept of interactional patterns, if we combine linguistic forms and social values, within which the message is constructed. Thus, at a pragmatic level, language users can choose whether to resort to patterns or not, or even to select the type of pattern to be employed:

Some of their motivated choices can be pattern-reforming, and some others pattern-reinforcing. In the former case, speakers play more directly and overtly with language and they and their listeners are prompted to more evaluative viewpoints; in the latter case, communicators develop a more pregnant affective convergence. Research has found that rules for existing patterns will be conformed to rather than departed from (Tuchel 2004: 48).

This holds valid for traditional ritualization of interaction, in the case of what we may call normal social roles and speech events, but, in difficult times as a pandemic, the whole context is affected, including these very interactional patterns and ritualization of interaction, which are both perturbed.

Yet, the rich, interdisciplinary nature of pragmatics allows us to resort to behavioural psychology, in an attempt to correct such alterations, although speech acts, as we have mentioned before, have been facing obstacles of their own.

Within applied behavioural psychology, Peter Collet provides us with very useful tools meant to help the hearer decode both the verbal and the nonverbal message, and even make predictions about the interlocutor's future course of action or discourse. He identifies a wide variety of micro- and macro-behavioural indicators, pertaining mostly to the nonverbal, but dwelling on the verbal as well, with a view to decrypting that invisible meaning that may even be hidden from the locutors themselves. Such indicators may range from very short micro-signals, called "micromomentary expressions" (Haggard and Isaacs 1996) to hidden or authentic ones, to "signature"-type indicators, or even inter-contextual ones, to predictive indicators, or those that give us away (*apud* Collet 2011: 17-30).

Indeed, behavioural patterns have proved to be predictable, once you understand what to look for, and micro- and macro-behavioural indicators play an important role in this process of discovering and anticipating behaviour and context in communication. Such a concept applies both to the people at large and to the people in control, such as boards, parties, governments, Parliaments, etc., i.e. (country) management.

Therefore, even in the absence of or considering the present-day scarcity of behavioural indicators, paying attention to some aspects that make up the overall context may prove helpful, such as the geo-political context, the socio-economic context, history and, most importantly, details of every country or individual under scrutiny. Thus, patterns emerge that usually allow for behavioural and decisional predictions not only at the level of separate individuals, but also at organization or country management level. For instance, authorities may choose to willingly 'leak' a document to the press or to the public, only to assess the reaction of the population to the measures that are to be taken anyway, although authorities take the official stand of condemning the leak and initially

stating that the document and its content only fall in the category of possibilities, not certainties (where it actually lands three days later, after having successfully assessed people's reaction to it). In such a case, the context relies heavily on being able to identify the pattern of such behaviour, but, once pattern identification occurs, context and real meaning recovery is much easier to perform.

However, we find ourselves in a very specific international context: a context of fear of contamination and of economic collapse, a mistrust in official information and a rise in conspiracy theory scenarios. How could communication fare in such troubled times? Very poorly, indeed. And it is not 19th century English hindering it, but an alteration in the very fabric of speech acts. We need to understand that part of the speech act theory is changing before our very eyes and that we must adapt it to present conditions and circumstances in communication. Or rather reconsider the contribution of behavioural psychology to the whole process. We can no longer rely on the extra-linguistic to the same extent as before, because our interlocutors now either wear masks (in the ever rarer case of face-to-face conversations), or are reduced to a small image on our phones or laptops (in the case of various platforms used for video-conferencing or online teaching). Or, even, worse, they are just reduced to voices during an audio call, in which case, besides the verbal (repetitions, choice of collocations or words, front or end focus, etc.), we are simply left with intonation, tone of voice and rhetorical or unintended breaks in their locutionary act.

Furthermore, the entire locutionary - illocutionary - perlocutionary connection is bound to undergo unexpected transformations that could never have been predicted. In such troubled times, as dealing this terrifying SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, people switch even from professional communication (which is expected from them in certain situations) to communicating the self, to steering the exchange towards a more personal approach, meant to diffuse some of the tensions they are under. For instance, I experienced this first-hand during online teaching sessions: some students felt the need to impart the news of them and/or of their parents having lost their jobs and express their feelings towards such a situation, while others made sure I understood that they needed to voice their own fears, frustrations and anxieties as a result of the quarantine and other such aspects connected to the present pandemic. They obviously needed to communicate themselves, their worries for their health and economic well-fare, rather than be 100% focused on the academic subject at

hand. Before the pandemic, this usually happened during regular office hours, when they used to come and discuss personal situations with me, either in the hope for a solution, or, most often, just to fulfil the need of being listened to. We need to adapt to that, as well, and not just coldly force them to return to academic subject matters exclusively.

Because being a professor is not just a job. And the university is not just sterile academic context. A professor should, or I dare say must, communicate himself / herself when teaching, as this is a very complex type of communication: while conversing on and debating the academic subject, we also communicate ourselves, our views, our experience, our beliefs, with a view to helping our students prepare for their future lives and careers. And, perhaps, quite often, time has shown me it is the formative role of the teacher, not the informative one, that which lingers through the years in his/her students' memories, long after they may have forgotten what the academic subject was about. It is the undeniable imprint, and a tremendous responsibility and honour in doing so, that a professor leaves on his/her students, as we are given a rare opportunity to literally touch people's lives while they are still in the process of becoming grown-ups, of becoming themselves.

Yet, this extraordinary type of communication is being affected as well: from not being able to properly see your students' faces and correctly assess language or concept acquisition, to not being able to reach some of your students who do not possess the material means to keep in touch with you because of financial difficulties. There are so many students who do not have either a laptop, or a phone, or internet connection, which should not be the reality of the 21st century we are living in. Hence, you adapt to the best of your abilities, making sure communication is still there. You call them and end up teaching or explaining concepts on the phone, you organize charity campaigns meant to provide them at least with older, second-hand electronic devices that you and other people can spare. Anything, just to make sure they keep in touch, just to make sure they *inter-text* themselves on a phone.

After all, communication can definitely be considered as a basic human necessity, in all its intricacy, with its fascinating blend of the linguistic and the extra-linguistic. I believe that this quarantine proved, without a shadow of a doubt, that people crave human interaction, and that they are willing to put up with all sorts of alterations in the fields of the illocutionary and the perlocutionary, as long as their locutionary act does

not fade into nothingness, but fulfils its original purpose, that of being received and decoded by an interlocutor. No matter the obstacles piling up in our way, we need to at least *inter-text* ourselves to (the) others, as an ultimate proof of the existence of that very self.

Hence, it becomes clear that the only thing that has always allowed us to move forward and that will continue to do so until the extinction of mankind, the main concept in this fight for the very survival of communication is *adaptability* - of language, of communication, of encoding and decoding information, of behaviour, of teaching (which simply requires more heart and soul and a more genuine student-focused approach), of reacting to all sorts of stimuli. We need to adapt to a new pragmatics and CDA both in our professional and in our personal communication, and we must understand that we have a rare, even if unfortunate, opportunity to witness verbal and nonverbal change.

This is where, unlike the 1920s, the 2020s can rely on a field of research absent 100 years ago: Neuro-Linguistic Programming, or NLP. According to Joseph O'Connor and John Seymour,

NLP is the art and science of excellence, based on researching the manner in which successful people from various domains of activity achieve remarkable results. These communications skills can be acquired by anyone with a view to efficiently act both personally and professionally (2019: 13).

Interestingly enough, NLP has built models of excellence particularly in the fields of *communication*, *business*, *education*, and *therapy*. The best thing about NLP is its highly practical nature, as its “ultimate purpose [...] is to be useful” (14-15), and the models, skills and techniques included in it are only meant to allow both locutor and interlocutor to discover what works and what does not work in communication, which obviously leaves room for improvement. For adaptability.

Moreover, to better suit people’s complex needs and relying on scientific research, “NLP developed along two mutually-complementing directions. Firstly, as a process of discovering patterns of excellence in any field. Secondly, as efficient manners of thinking and communicating used by remarkable people” (26). We can, thus, notice that communication is at the core of NLP, when communicating either to oneself, or to others. In fact, communication should first start within, which would build knowledge of

one's own context, and only then move outwards, where context shifts with every speaker and with each situation.

Therefore, from the point of view of this new pragmatics that would enhance our chances at communicating our messages and ourselves, we may choose to adapt by resorting to the following useful techniques (or, rather, mind-frames):

- direct *problems* towards *objectives*;
- turn *why* into *how*;
- reposition *failure* into *feedback*;
- rebrand *necessities* into *possibilities*;
- replace *assumptions* with *curiosity and fascination* (apud O'Connor and Seymour 2019: 30-32).

NLP also supports the utmost importance of the extra-linguistic in communication, emphasizing the fact that most of the message heavily relies on the non-verbal elements of the exchange. In fact, research showed that, either when having one interlocutor, or when public speaking is involved, 55% of the impact of one's message is determined by body language (posture, gestures, face mimic, visual contact), 38% by the tone of voice, and only 7% by the content of what one is saying, i.e. the words used when speaking (apud Mehrabian and Farris, 1967: 248-252). Therefore, it becomes clear why we are dealing with difficulties at the level of the illocutionary, but especially at the level of the perlocutionary during such troubled times as pandemics, either in the 1920s and in the 2020s, when faced with a staggering 93% of communication taking place at the level of the nonverbal.

When overlapping this overwhelming importance of the extra-linguistic in communication, we can even think of adapting the Kübler-Ross (1997) change curve and Marian Staş's perspective on it (2015) to this very process of adapting context and the locutionary - illocutionary - perlocutionary to the pandemic at hand. In such a case, our five stages of this change curve would consist in:

1. *denial* (when people deny the necessity of adapting to a new type of communication and try to ignore the restrictions imposed),
2. *anger* (when people get angry at being forced to resort to this new type of communication resulting from the restrictions imposed),
3. *numbness* (when people simply lack the will to communicate, considering how many changes this would imply in a new context with so many restrictions imposed),

4. *early win* (or *bargaining*) (when people negotiate first with themselves and then with others and begin to realize that they can communicate again, if they adapt to the new conditions and circumstances), and
5. *consolidation*, with the emergence of a new pragmatics and an altered way of communicating.

In its turn, this change curve may lead us towards a three-stage process that would practically organize the manner in which we adapt to the new context: awareness, acceptance, and action. We first need to be aware of the on-going state of affairs in communication, then accept what is happening and what consequences this has on context and on the very process of communicating, and only then can we act accordingly and adapt to the change that is required of us.

This type of process, though, comes with its own challenges, which make it even more difficult to complete. We have to tackle intricate issues, such as changing one's mentality, teaching by example, as well as understanding and internalizing flexibility and the concepts of pragmatics and efficiency in communication. And it is adaptability that will eventually determine who stays an active and efficient actor in speech acts and speech events, and who remains passive either forever, or until inner belief or outward circumstance forces them to adapt.

If we could sum up the most important pragmatics-related things that this pandemic has definitely taught us so far, it would come down to the fact that context can change in the blink of an eye, that we crave human interaction and end up *inter-texting* our cultures, our beliefs, our realities, and ultimately ourselves, that we have the rare opportunity to witness pragmatic change within language, that we have been granted the time to turn inwards instead of being almost permanently focused on the outwards. As St. Augustine said, "People go and admire the heights of the mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the wide riverbeds, the endless shores of the Ocean or the clusters of stars, but no longer heed themselves" (*Confessions*, 8: 15). It was high time we turned within, so that we might perform better outwardly.

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