ON LANGUAGE IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Educational contexts exist because there are some people (teachers) who have been assigned by the society to transmit a certain knowledge to the younger generation, so that they can take an active part in the building of that society once they become adults. A lot has been written about how teachers fulfil this task, a lot and from many points of view. In this article we will concentrate on the use of language in educational contexts, trying to explain in what extent language is not only the means used, but the goal of the assignment. This will bring up all the problems of interpretation, of how a certain utterance is given a certain meaning and how it is guaranteed that this meaning is shared.

It has always been accepted that language has a communicative function. According to Vygotsky (1962) language has its origin in working contexts, as a means to satisfy the speech intentions rising in such contexts. When people share their experiences and knowledge they use language and, by using it, they make it. As W.V.Quine[1] puts it:

> language is a social enterprise which is keyed to intersubjectively observable objects in the external world (p. 81)

Thus, language appears both as a way of coding reality and as a way of making reality "real". Words make it possible for us to become aware of objects, which is, in a way, making them come to life. Maybe there is such a thing as "the real world" but, for us, only what we analyse becomes distinct and useful. If two people observe a certain event and afterwards are asked to describe what they have seen, the possibility of getting two rather different stories is high: their "reality" seems to be different. However, the event has been the same.

Even if language is the result of previous contexts of usage, previous communicative needs which have been satisfied, etc., the use speakers do of

language will enforce a certain view of the world upon the hearer. As P.F.Strawson[2] says,

> 'Mentioning' or 'referring' is not something an expression does, it is something that someone can use an expression to do (p. 62)

This approach to language views it mainly as a way to communicate both "realities" (however subjectively analysed) and feelings. Here, communication means the sharing of information, the possibility of establishing an interpersonal relationship around a certain information with the aim of finally sharing it.

However, language is more than that: it is also a speech act. Speakers not only communicate a certain information about the world, satisfying certain communicative needs arising at a given moment under certain circumstances. Their final intention is not simply to "pass" the message: it is to enforce a certain reaction upon the hearer. This is what Searle[3] defines as the speaker's perlocutionary act

> ... the notion of consequences or *effects* such acts (the illocutionary acts) have on the actors, thoughts or beliefs, etc., of hearers (p. 25)

Speakers expect hearers to act according to their expectations. This function of language as an *act* is so important that if the hearer does not correctly respond by showing the expected reaction, it will not really matter much whether he has understood the information: the process will be considered to have failed. The way the hearer acts is the only external indicator that the communications has been achieved.

We are confronted, thus, to a dialectic situation: on one hand the language speakers use in its communicative function, due to the fact of living in society, implies that it is the result of previous users and, on the other hand, speakers make language by using it. Language is both social and individual, but its usage has to remain within a frame of shared meaning in order to make interpretation possible. The same can be said of language as a speech act: the rules of interpreting those speech acts have to be shared. This places language as the result of a social convention, in order to guarantee the possibility of coexistence between what is social and what is individual. As long as people share a reality and a language, both language and its use is the result of a convention. When we share a language we share a certain representation of the world, which we believe to be true, as well as a certain understanding of what kind of behaviour is expected when a certain speech act is performed. This representation of the world and of behaviours, somehow imposed on all the potential speakers, is the frame of their understanding as well as the frame of

their thinking. It is this shared frame of interpretation which makes communication possible.

To be able to interpret the speaker's words, the hearer has to share a certain information about the context where the utterance has taken place in order to understand what kind of relationship the speaker establishes with the non-linguistic world and with what we could call "the world of behaviour". This brings up a much wider concept of context than simply the physical context. As D.Davidson[4] says,

> We do not know what someone means unless we know what he believes; we do not know what someone believes unless we know what he means (p. 102).

Thus, parts of the context are also the time when the utterance takes place, the speaker's guesses on what the ability of the hearer as a potential interpreter are, the hearer's intuitions of what the speaker expects of him, etc. As P.F.Strawson[5] puts it,

> the context of utterance is (...) the time, the place, the situation, the identity of the speaker, the subjects which form the immediate focus of interest, and the personal histories of both the speaker and those he is addressing (p. 72)

The interpretation of a certain speech act, therefore, is the result of taking that broad context into account, having the clues of the conventions which regulate the use of language. And this interpretation is possible because language is the result of a convention. The main feature of conventions is that they are rule-governed, and so, in Searle's[6] words,

> speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behaviour (p. 41)

This rule-form of behaviour happens to become apparent in two ways. On one side, we can only mean what this shared frame called language allows us to mean, as it is the result of a convention which makes the word "chair" refer to such an object as the one we know by "chair". It is also the result of a convention which regulates a certain grammar as "correct", which conveys certain meanings to certain intonation patterns. And, moreover, it is also the result of a convention what makes us understand that a certain utterance expects from us a certain reaction, what kind of act is enforced on us by a certain speech act.

H.P.Grice[7] has analysed communicative cooperation as an ordered sequence of speech acts, and states that utterances have to be formulated following the principles of quantity, quality, relevance and mode. That is, individual contributions have to be enough but not excessive, justified and true, adjusted to the topic and formulated in such a way as to make interpretation possible. However, this cooperation implies that there is a shared rationality, which makes us agree on what is relevant and which helps us take our decisions around possible formulations and possible interpretations.

If human communication is a cooperative act, then it has to be regulated by certain rules. In order to be effective, those rules have to be accepted by everyone, and this fact has to be known by everyone; moreover, people also have to accept that having those rules is better than not having them. No doubt that, like all rules, they impose a certain restriction on individual freedom, but people still accept them because, besides being aware that it is better to have them, they also know that there is always the possibility of changing them if they proved to be no longer effective due to changes in their common interests. Once again, when talking about the rules people have given themselves in order to make communication possible, the need of a shared rationality appears.

For many years, rationality has been considered an objective concept, something people had to discover and then try to follow. Once discovered, it would help optimize the use of certain means to reach certain goals. However, we would like to define the concept of rationality not as something objective, but also, once more, as the result of an intersubjective construction. It is the result of the optimizations of the use of certain shared means in order to reach certain objectives. Thus, what may be considered as "rational" at a certain moment, in a certain context, might be considered "non-rational" at another moment or in another context. We can apply this definition of rationality to linguistic utterances as well, as they are a part of the human behaviour: an utterance is, simply, a certain kind of behaviour, a specific kind of human act and, therefore, a rational act.

The two levels of interpretation

When confronted to a given utterance, the interpreter has to be able to make a sense out of those words uttered under certain circumstances by a specific speaker. On one side, the interpreter is supposed to know the language well enough. This means he is able to identify both referents and predications (the objects and the concepts, in Fregean's terms). Thus, he is able to attribute a certain meaning to the utterance, a series of words connected by means of a

certain grammar and uttered according to certain intonation patters. This is the first level of interpretation which, according to Davidson (1995), has to do with what he calls the "literal meaning" of the sentence. He states that sentences are semantically autonomous, that is, that they have a meaning by themselves, out of any context.

On the other side, besides this literal meaning, there is the "real meaning" of the utterance, what the speaker really intends to communicate when he utters the sentence, which defines the kind of speech act he is performing. This is what we have called the second level of interpretation. While the literal meaning is dependent on the knowledge of the linguistic convention, the real meaning is strongly dependent on the knowledge of the social conventions and of the context, taken in its broader sense, using this knowledge to interpret the utterance according to the shared rationality. That is, to correctly interpret an utterance, the hearer has to know what the referents of the words are, he has to be able to understand the predication and he has to identify the illocutionary force indicator of the utterance, which shows how a certain predication is to be taken (a statement, a question, an order...). Moreover, the hearer has to consider whether it is reasonable that this were the meaning the speaker wanted him to work out of his utterance. Because as the final meaning of a sentence, its literal meaning, depends on the speaker's use ot the sentence in a given context, under certain given conditions, the result of the hearer's first level of interpretation may be neither logical nor reasonable in that context. Nevertheless, the first level of interpretation has to be done and the literal meaning worked out as a first step. As M.Dummett[8] says,

> we must have a prior understanding of the *sentence* before we can be in a position to ask what the point of a particular utterance of it may be (p. 138)

In the second level of interpretation, the hearer has to wonder what the speaker wants to say when he uses those words, what his final communicative aim might be when he performs his speech act. Because, as Searle[9] puts it,

> ... a speaker may mean more than what he actually says. (p. 18)

Therefore, the literal meaning of the sentence has to be considered under the light of a rational thinking. Sometimes there might even be a clear contradiction between the literal meaning of an utterance and what the hearer interprets as the speaker's actual communicative intentions. For example, when someone says "Great!" just after his best vase has been dropped on the floor, it is most improbable that this utterance be a sign of happiness. H.P. Grice has named these contradictions "conversational implicatures", and they are detected

when it does not seem reasonable to expect the speaker's intentions to be what the literal meaning of the sentence suggests. The concept of rationality as an intersubjective construction, together with the idea of language as a convention, prove to be useful here. Because the hearer expects the speaker to be at least as clever as he himself is, to think as logically and reasonably as he himself does, and that prevents him from taking the literal meaning for the right one. If there were no such shared rationality, if language were not subjected to any kind of convention, any interpretation would be possible, no matter how crazy it might seem. But craziness is not expected as part of the convention which makes communication possible and, therefore, certain interpretations will have to be discarded, no matter how "literal" and "technically correct" they might be.

In front of a conversational implicature the hearer applies what Davidson[10] calls the "Principle of Charity":

> Charity in interpreting the words and thoughts of others is unavoidable (...): just as we must maximize agreements, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about, so we must maximize the self-consistencies we attribute to him on pain of not understanding *him* (p. 101)

What the hearer does when applying this Principle of Charity to an utterance is, more or less, to ask himself "What would I mean here and now if I were the speaker?". Indirectly he considers the different interpretative options and chooses the one which better seems to suit both the situation and what he supposes to be the speaker's intentions. Thus, the final interpretation is the result of several individual decisions. As J.McDowell[11] says,

> the ability of comprehend heard speech is an information-processing capacity (p. 118)

The hearer's final choice may be right or wrong, of course. If it is right, the communication will proceed fluently. If his decision proves to have been wrong, the communication will soon appear out of focus and rearrangements will have to be undertaken. It is in this sense that we state that meaning is the result of an intersubjective construction, that knowledge is not *transmitted*, but also jointly constructed. Meanings are not the result of the speaker "sending" the information in the air. For a communicative process to be successful, the activity of both speaker and hearer are needed. However, as they both have their personal idiosyncrasy, their past experiences, the amount of information they have already internalized, when they want to maintain an effective verbal interaction to share some information they have to guess what kind of information the other one might need in order to understand what he wants him

to understand. G. Frege[12] wrote that such a thing as the "right interpretation" never wholly exists, because

> the idea is subjective: one man's idea is not that of another. There results, as a matter of course, a variety of differences in the ideas associated with the same sense (p. 26)

However, as long as the interpretation remains within the frame of a shared meaning, which means that the hearer actually reacts as the speaker expected him to, communication is guaranteed, even if there are slight differences between what the speaker intended the hearer to interpret and what the hearer has actually interpreted. As long as the hearer's response satisfies the speaker's intentions, communications will be considered fulfilled.

The "long conversation"

Janet Maybin[13] was the first author to use this metaphor applied to a teaching-learning process. It describes the situation perfectly well, as all teaching-learning processes are interactive processes where we find communication (some new meanings have to be constructed), action (certain acts are expected as the result of the interpretation of certain utterances) and an intersubjective rationality (which makes the choices of interpretation possible). Moreover, the final aim of teaching-learning processes is to make students become experts in the use of language in certain contexts, that is, to learn the language games applied to certain situations[14], as the correct use of the language is the only perceptible indicator we have that the concept has been internalized: we cannot get into anybody's mind, but we can see how he acts, what language he uses to express his thoughts.

As it is an interactive process, this "long conversation" appears in a rule-governed context: the school context, with its specific rules and its specific roles. Besides the conventions which rule all social contexts, educational contexts present specific conventions under the form of four constitutive rules which need to be accepted by all the members of the educational community. We have named these conditions Primary Conditions and, unless they are accepted, both teaching and learning will become near-impossible tasks.

- The communication has to be physically, psychologically and morally possible (we think of "moral authority")
- There has to be silence enough to talk and to listen
- Both teacher and students have to accept their role and recognize the other's role

- Both teacher and students have to know the language and its culture well enough.

Thus, formal educational contexts appear as rule-governed from the beginning. It is by these four Primary Conditions that an educational context is defined. They are so important, that unless they are accepted, the risk of failure is high, as the joint construction of new meanings will not even have the chance to start. Certain students may have problems in recognising and accepting some (or all) of these conventions, be it because they simply reject rules and show difficulties in socialization, be it because they are immigrants and do not know the language and the culture well enough. This will develop in them a strong feeling of "not belonging to the group", and the problems both in discipline and learning are certain to arise. The studies about the attention to diversity should begin by taking the importance of these four Primary Conditions into account.

One of the Primary Conditions is the recognition and acceptance of the roles of teacher and student. To analyse and compare both roles we have focused our attention on three aspects: the object on which the subjects will act, the objective of their act and the instrument used.

Teachers have students as their object of intervention, they work on them. Their objective is to modify the cognitive structure of students helping them assimilate new concepts and procedures. In other words, their objective is the act of teaching. And the instrument used is the shared language. This means that they want the students to be finally able to use the language they use in the way they do, as the only clear indicator that they have been able to internalise the new concepts. On the other side, students have the new concepts as their object of intervention, they work on them. Their objective is the assimilation of those new concepts and procedures into their cognitive structure. That is, their objective is the act of learning. And the instrument used is the shared language. They will try to use the language the way the teacher does as an indicator that they have internalised the new concepts as expected. Both roles appear as complementary and language appears as the linking thread between the two roles.

When analysing the act of teaching we have found that, in order to develop an effective instruction, the teacher has to satisfy four conditions: the Condition of Sincerity, the Essential Condition, the Condition of Intentionality and the Condition of Formulation. The Condition of Sincerity reminds us that teachers have to be sincere, not only by telling true concepts, but by showing honest attitudes as well (one cannot tell students all the virtues of a democratic system while personally showing a non-democratic behaviour; one cannot shout "I do not shout!" without falling into strong existential inconsistencies). The Essential Condition reminds us that teachers have to know what they teach. According to Austin's words [15] this means that whatever is referred to must exist

(axiom of existence) and that if a predicate is true, any other predicate referring to that object must also be true (axiom of identity). Searle [16] added a third axiom: if the speaker refers to a certain object, he has to be able to identify it (axiom of identification). The satisfaction of these three axioms defines the Essential Condition.

The Conditions of Intentionality states that teachers are expected to have the intention (the *sincere* intention) to make themselves understood by all the students, no matter how intelligent they are. This means that teachers are due to accept that students part from different cognitive levels, that they show different abilities. And, according to the Condition of Sincerity, accepting the existence of different realities implies a serious personal compromise. Finally, the Condition of Formulation implies that the teacher will make the effort to formulate his ideas in such a way that any student might understand him. The language the teacher uses in his utterances has to be potentially understandable by all the students. A formulation which uses a kind of language (that is, a kind of concepts) far beyond the students' abilities will make the act of teaching wholly unsuccessful.

Those four conditions prove to be an interesting instrument for the analysis of practical teaching-learning situations. If we analyse what has gone wrong in a class, provided the Preliminary Conditions are given, we will always find that one of those four conditions has not been satisfied. At the same time, they help us analyse how a teaching-learning process develops. This is what we will now try to do: to present some practical examples and analyse those speech acts under the light of the theoretical concepts we have so far developed.

Some practical examples

Imagine we are in a classroom and the subject that is being studied is the difference in use between the Simple Past and the Simple Present Perfect. Students know what a Simple Present Perfect is and what a Simple Past is, how they are formed (what language one has to use to distinguish them from other tenses) and what kind of information is linked to one or the other. During what we call the phase of the presentation of new information all this knowledge has been jointly constructed. Therefore, there is a shared meaning about the subject: the theory is known. Now they are practicing this knowledge. At a certain moment, somebody utters the following sentence:

"Can we use the Simple Past in this sentence?"

According to Donaldson's Principle of Semantic Autonomy, this utterance has an autonomous meaning. It states that there is such a thing as the

Simple Past and that the predication is its possible use in the sentence. As the utterance has a clear illocutionary force indicator (graphically marked in the written sentence by "?" and in the verbal utterance by a certain intonation), this helps interpret that the speaker doubts whether the truth factor may be applied to that predication. Thus, in other words, what Donaldson calls the literal meaning of the sentence corresponds to the following communicative intention of the speaker:

> "I doubt whether the Simple Past can be used in this sentence"

However, this sentence may be uttered by the teacher or by a student. This variable implies that the interpretation of the same utterance has to take into account not only the autonomous meaning of the sentence but the context as well, in this case, the speaker's identity and the specific classroom situation.

First, let us consider that this sentence has been uttered by the teacher. Thus, the hearer is the student and, consequently, according to his role, he is now the one expected to interpret the teacher's utterance. As the student knows the language, he is supposed to be able to interpret the literal meaning of the sentence. However, according to the shared rationality, this literal meaning arises a conversational implicature: it is not logical for the teacher to show doubts whether the Simple Past can be used in a certain sentence. The student is aware of the Essential Condition that regulates all teacher's interventions in a teaching-learning process and, therefore, it is illogical to accept his ignorance on that point. Thus, applying the Principle of Charity formulated by Davidson, the student asks himself: "Keeping in mind that teachers know the subject they teach, what would I mean if I were him?" The student solves the conversational implicature interpreting the real meaning of the sentence to be

> "I want you to tell me whether the Simple Past may be used in this sentence"

and he answers "yes" or "no", according to his knowledge. Let us underline that the interpretation has been successful, no matter whether the student's answer is right or wrong: the student may show little knowledge of the subject if his answer is wrong, but he shows a perfect capacity of interpreting the teacher's words, which is what we are interested in right now.

Now, let us suppose that the utterance has been verbalised by the student. In that case, the literal meaning and the real meaning of the sentence coincide, as it is perfectly well adapted to the student's role to show doubts around a certain topic they are learning. No conversational implicature arises. In this case, however, the content of the teacher's answer is relevant. His answer

has to satisfy the truth factor because, on the contrary, he wouldn't satisfy neither the Condition of Sincerity nor the Essential Condition.

The use of conversational implicatures as a means for waking up the student's interest is frequent. Let us analyse the following utterance:

"The Simple Past may be used in this sentence".

The referent and the predication is the same than in the previous example (the existence of something called Simple Past and its possible use in the given sentence) and what changes is the illocutionary force indicator (the proposition is now considered according to the truth factor). If it is the teacher who utters this sentence, we could consider that the literal meaning and the real meaning coincide: teachers are expected to announce true predicates. However, the context of the utterance may contradict this literal meaning: the student may be aware that the Simple Past may <u>not</u> be used in that sentence. By the Condition of Sincerity he knows that the teacher cannot lie on that point; furthermore, by the Essential Condition teachers are supposed to have a good knowledge of what they teach. Therefore, the student realises that he is in front of a conversational implicature: the sentence cannot mean what it seems to mean. Applying the Principle of Charity, and keeping in mind the four Conditions which regulate the act of teaching, the student finally interprets the utterance as meaning

"I expect you to reject my statement that the Simple Past may be used in this sentence"

and he utters "Sorry, are you sure?"

Of course, making use of conversational implicatures in a teaching-learning process implies taking the risk of failure, of not being correctly interpreted. What if no student reacts? At least, in such a case the teacher has a clear indicator that a miss-interpretation has occurred. He has several possibilities: to create a long silence (and silences are not understandable in a communicative context and act as a sign of alarm), or reformulate his real intention: "Do you agree with what I have just said?"

Conclusions

We have presented language in its communicative function and as a speech act expecting to enforce a certain behaviour upon the hearer. The interpretation of utterances is possible because both speakers and hearers share

a certain rationality, which is the result of an intersubjective construction. This way of presenting language is what makes the concept of teaching-learning processes as a "long conversation" so attractive. Language appears not only as the device used by the teacher in his activity as mediator to help students in their process of building new knowledge; language appears as the final proof that this knowledge has been constructed and internalised. The whole teaching-learning process turns around language: as the device used to make knowledge possible and as an indicator that this knowledge has been constructed and internalised. And, in the end, the frame of the shared language has enlarged: teacher and students share new language games.

Following the powerful and suggestive image of the "long conversation", we have analysed teaching-learning processes as a series of speech acts, a series of finely linked processes of utterances and interpretations, where not only "what is known" becomes important, but also what we guess the other one to know becomes the focus of both teachers' and students' attention. This analysis helps us understand how students learn, how the shared meaning is finally reached. In this context, the possibility of playing with conversational implicatures sets a new light upon the analysis of the whole process, as the somehow unexpected becomes expectable.

But there is more to it. The analysis of the speech acts has brought to light the possibility of defining different styles of teaching. At first sight, the role of teachers is very clear: they know what they teach and are perfectly able to formulate clear utterances in such a way that no confusion may arise. This would mean a kind of utterances where the literal meaning and the real meaning coincide. However, we have seen that conversational implicatures exist. The degree in which they are used will define different teaching styles. Thus, we could define what we might call a "linear style" of teaching, where everything is according to the rules, where only the expectable is expected. However clear it might be, it is a rather monotonous style, with no "traps", with little indicators of the degree of mental activity students actually perform. At the other extreme we could define a style where the unexpectable should always be expected, with an important use of conversational implicatures. This style forces the students to be very alert offers the teacher clear indicators of their mental activity. It is a very vivid style, but it is also a risky one, as it needs a very active and alert response from the students in order to interpret the utterances correctly. The way how teachers use the resources of interpretation will help us identify different teaching styles: from the extreme where literal and real meaning coincide, to the extreme where conversational implicatures become the rulers of the game. Thus, a certain complicity develops between the teacher and the students, both recognising each other's style and using this knowledge for further interpretations.

It is a personal choice of teachers to define their own style. Very often, rather than a conscious choice, the result of experiences, of finding the way that better suits their personal features. The aim is always the same: to get the students use the language the same way they use it, as the only way to have an evidence that the students have learnt the new concepts. A question arises: how to avoid the risk of learning *words* and not concepts. Through learning how to use those word, through learning how to act in response to certain utterances in certain contexts. If a certain language is properly used, we have the right to think that the student has properly internalised the underlying concepts. Learning is, thus, learning to act.

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Notes

[1] Quine, W.V.,1(993), "Mind and verbal disposition" in A.W. Moore, *Meaning and Reference,* Oxord, O.U.P.

[2] Strawson, P.F., "On Referring" in A.W.Moore, op. *cit.*

[3] Searle, J.R., (1969), *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge, C.U.P.

[4] Davidson, D., "Truth and Meaning", in A.W. Moore, op. *cit.*

[5] Strawson, P.F. "On Referring", op. *cit.*

[6] Searle, J.R., (1969), *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge, C.U.P.

[7] Grice, H.P. (1975), "Logic and Conversation" in Cole, P., Morgan,J. (ed.) (1975)Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech act. Academic Press, New York.

[8] Dummett, M., "What Does the Appeal to Use Do for the Theory of Meaning?", in A.W.Moore, op. *cit.*

[9] Searle, J.P., op. *cit.*

[10] Davidson, D., op. *cit.*

[11] Mc.Dowell, J., "On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name", in A.W. Moore, op. *cit.*

[12] Frege. G., "On Sense and Reference", in A.V. Moore, op. *cit.*

[13] Maybin, Janet, "Children's voices: Talk, Knowledge and Identity" in D. Graddol, J. Maybin and B. Stierer, *Researching Language and Literacy in Social Contexts* p. 136. Clevendon: Multilingual Matters

[14] L. Wittgenstein defined the concept of "language game" in his book *The Blue and Brown Books* (1933-1935)

[15] Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to do Things with Words,* Oxford, OUP.

[16] Searle, J.P., op. *cit.*