DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 748 CS 502 128

AUTHOR   Kushner, Malcolm
TITLE   A Reconceptualization cf Rules.
PUB DATE   76
NOTE   12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
            Western Speech Communication Association (47th, San
            Francisco, California, November 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Theories; *Conceptual Schemes; *Discourse
            Analysis; *Information Theory; *Interaction Process
            Analysis; Language Research; Language Usage; *Speech
            Communication
IDENTIFIERS Whitehead (Alfred North)

ABSTRACT
            Recently, communications scholars and theorists have
begun formulating rules to describe the workings of language in
various situations of everyday use. Theoretically, current rules
approaches are in violation of the basic philosophy underlying
communication theory--Whitehead's notion cf process. The
inconsistency is a function of the degree of generalization required
to formulate a rule, the determining cf relative importance of
contextual differences of the situation under study, and the
continuing reinterpretation of important and unimportant variables
after the event. The recognition of two levels cf rules eliminates
the problem of exceptions. (1) Context-specific rules are unique to
each specific occurrence of communication as process. (2) Meta-rules
are heuristic and serve to aid in the discovery of context-specific
rules, but are not bound by the necessity of actual occurrence or by
the qualification of exceptions. Such meta-rules continually point
language research in the direction of discourse analysis of specific,
real-world situations, emphasize the methodology of participant
observation, and remove the monkey of process from the
language-in-context theorist's back. (LS)

<u>A Reconceptualization of Rules</u>

by

Malcolm Kushner

University of Southern California

Presented to the Language Behavior Division of the

Western Speech Communication Association for the

1976 San Francisco Convention

Increasingly, scholars from a wide variety of communication related fields have begun theorizing about communication from a rules perspective. These scholars place language as the central focus of communicative inquiry. If the essence of communication is meaning and if language is central to communication, language and meaning may be viewed as closely tied and engaged in a very fundamental relationship. The problem for study then, is trying to determine the exact nature of the role that language plays in contributing to the meaning of a communicative event. These scholars believe that in order to have a real understanding of communication, it is necessary to understand the use of language in context. Toward this end, several theorists (eg. Lakoff, Searle, etc.) have proposed rules that govern and explain the workings of language as it occurs in various situations of its everyday use.[1]

While the notion of applying rules to communication is a sound one, this paper will take exception to the current manner of application. I will argue that current rule approaches are in violation of the basic philosophy underlying communication theory - the Whiteheadian notion of process. The Whiteheadian notion of process is well embodied in Berlo's definition of process:

> If we accept the concept of process, we view the events and relationships as dynamic, on-going, ever-changing, continuous. When we label something as a process we also mean that it does not have a beginning, an end, a fixed sequence of events. It is not static, at rest. It is moving. The ingredients within a process interact; each affects all of the others.

> Communication theory reflects a process point of view. A communication theorist rejects the possibility that nature consists of events or ingredients that are seperable from all other events. He argues that you cannot talk about the beginning or end of communication or say that a particular idea came from one specific source, that communication occurs in only one way and so on. 2

For an excellent discussion of the Whiteheadian notion of process
see David Smith's article "Communication Research and the Idea
of Process."[3]

While accepting the Whiteheadian notion of process as a
philosophical cornerstone of their work, communication theorists
have long had trouble dealing with it. In "Communication Research
and the Idea of Process," Smith demonstrates a contradiction in
the work of communication empiricists. He claims that their
theoretical endeavors are conceptually sound in terms of the
Whiteheadian notion of process but that their methedology violates
it. This paper will charge that a worse state of affairs exists
for theorists who approach communication from a language rules
perspective. Not even their theoretical work is conceptually
sound. The rules that they propose are inconsistent with the
Whiteheadian notion of process.

This paper will demonstrate the inconsistency and its
consequences (Section I), propose a reconceptualization of rules
that will eliminate the problem (Section II), and discuss the
implications of the solution (Section III).

I. The Generality Paradox

Implicit in the rules that theorists have proposed to explain
language in context is the assumption of a certain degree of
generality. There are two senses of generality that are used
here. The first sense of generality assumes that communicative
situations possess enough similarity to allow for the formulation
of rules that apply to a number of like situations. Although we
are all familiar with the expression, "there are exceptions to
every rule," there is some point at which a rule ceases to be a

rule in the face of an overwhelming number of exceptions. (The exact number of exceptions is intuitive. After a rule is proposed and exceptions begin to be found, we say that the strength of the rule decreases. As more exceptions are found, we say that the rule is no longer a rule. The exception has become the rule.)

The second sense of generality assumes that the number of like situations which form the domain of a given rule will be of adequate quantity. (Adequate quantity is a matter of intuition. The point is that if the number of like situations is too small, then the focus of the rule is too narrow and the rule will be trivial.)

There is an inherent conflict between the two senses of generality which has trapped language in context rules in a generality paradox. By trying not to violate the first sense of generality (eliminating exceptions), the second sense is violated, (the range of situations is reduced to the trivial). By trying not to violate the second sense of generality (having an adequate number of like situations), the first sense is violated (a large number of exceptions occur). (There is, of course, an exception to this rule. Cases exist where a highly general rule (in the second sense) can be demonstrated to have few or no exceptions. The significance of such rules may be discounted as trivial because they take the form of truisms; eg. Lakoff's rule - "It is impolite to impose.")[4]

Theorists continually reframe their rules more generally or more specifically in an attempt to achieve a balance where the conflict doesn't exist. The logic of the Whiteheadian notion

5

of process dictates that these attempts be doomed to failure. Even if a rule is so specific that it has a range of only two situations, there will still be an infinite number of contextual variables that will differ between the two situations. Thus, the rule will apply to the situation which served as a model from which it was derived, but the other situation will be an exception.

One might object that it is an erroneous assumption to believe that the infinity of deifferences are communicatively important. I contend that this is an assumption dictated by the Whiteheadian notion of process. Even if all the differences are not communicatively important, a simple question demonstrates why they need be treated as such - what variables of a situation are communicatively important? The answer to this question leads directly into reductionism - a practice which runs counter to the Whiteheadian notion of process. Whitehead writes:

> The how an actual entity becomes constitutes what the actual entity is; so that the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its being is constituted by its becoming. 5

In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Everything is interrelated and emergent, and <u>each situation is unique</u>!

From a strict point of view, all of the infinity of variables are communicatively important since everything is interrelated and inseperable. Intuitively, however, one can sense that some aspects of the situation can be treated as possessing primary importance, while other aspects may be relegated to a negligible role. This cannot be determined in advance of occurence and may even change after occurence. Support for this assertion comes from Wilson's writings on the interpretive paradigm:

> A central characteristic of documentary interpretation is
> that later appearances may force a revision in the perceived
> underlying pattern that in turn compels a reinterpretation
> of what previous appearances "really were."....Consequently,
> what the situation "really was" and what the actors "really
> did" on a particular occasion are continually open to
> redefinition. 6

Therefore, variables that one might intuitively label as
unimportant initially, may come to be of primary importance at a
later time. Since there is no time limit for the redefinition of
a situation, continuing reinterpretation gives all variables the
potential for importance.

If each communication situation is essentially different, then
each has its own set of rules. We cannot come into a situation
and analyze it with ready-made rules and think they are going to
apply. Thus, the assumption underlying the first sense of
generality - that communicative situations possess enough similarity
to allow for the formulation of rules that apply to a number of
like situations - is incorrect.

II. The Relationship Between Level I, Level II, and Meta-Rules

In order to visualize the problem clearly and understand
the solution I will propose, it is convenient to think of the
universe as consisting of levels. These may be conceptualized
as levels of abstraction, where Level I concerns specific, real
world occurrences and succeedingly higher levels concern
idealizations of an increasingly general nature.

Level I rules are the actual context-specific rules that
emerge uniquely to, and operate in, every individual situation.
They cannot be predicted with casual accuracy because of their
uniqueness. Hawes supports this view as well as much of what was
stated in the preceding section:

Yet another difference between the traditionalist and the
naturalist perspective is the role and function of logics.
By "logic" I mean a set of assumptions and rules for
obtaining implications or entailments of those assumptions.
The traditionalist uses preconceived logics to direct research
and interpret findings. In short, the researcher establishes
the nouns and relationships among them before gathering data.
In fact, what constitutes a datum is determined by conceiving
the logics prior to the observations. The naturalist on the
other hand, is identifying the logics of the people being
observed. In short, the researcher uses a variety of methods
to determine the nouns and relationships among them that
constitute everyday logics of social actors. 7

My position might be termed modified naturalist. I don't

believe that a preconceived logic (or rules) should determine

what constitutes a datum, but I do believe such a logic (or rules)

can be used open-mindedly while making observations, to assist

in the identification of the logics (or rules) of the people

being observed. Such logics or rules, thus become one of the

variety of methods that Hawes refers to, as employed by the

naturalist for discovering the everyday logics of social actors.

Such logics or rules (preconceived) are what I term meta-rules.

A Level II rule is a meta-rule. It is a heuristic, whose

purpose is to aid in the discovery of Level I rules. It is

context-sensitive, but not context-specific! This trait frees the

meta-rule from the necessity of actual occurrence. It is an

idealization. It should be thought of in the sense of the "normal"

or "average" American (with two and a half kids). Such a person

is, of course, a statistical fiction. But it is a fiction

which guides us in our evaluation of reality. This is the most

important feature of meta-rules. It eliminates the problem of

exceptions and ends the inherent conflict between the two senses

of generality.

Hawes' idea of first-order and second-order constructs is

roughly analagous to my conception of Level I and Level II rules:

> Using Alfred Schutz's terminology for a moment, one would
> say that a traditionalist assumes first-order constructs of
> the everyday world and proceeds directly to the use of
> second-order constructs of the scientific world. The
> naturalist, rather than assuming first-order constructs,
> attempts to identify and explicate them. The order of a
> construct is roughly analagous to its degree of remoteness
> from its everyday use and meaning. 8

Just as Hawes states that the naturalist doesn't assume first-order constructs but attempts to identify and explicate them, I say that Level I rules are unique to each situation and can't be postulated prior to occurrence; They must be discovered after the event. One of the ways that Level I rules may be discovered is through the use of meta-rules (Level II rules). These exist independently of specific context and so, like Hawes' second-order construct, are further removed from reality.

The mistake of language theorists to date has been their attempt to propose preconceived, general rules as Level I rules. They push the real Level I rules (context-specific) off of the spectrum as if they don't exist. (This is why I'm making such a big deal about the term meta-rule. It focuses attention on the fact that there are rules operating at a lower level of abstraction than the generalizations that language in context theorists' currently pass off as the bottom line. There are specific rules that operate uniquely in every individual situation and these are the Level I rules - the real bottom line).

At this point, the reader may feel frustrated and raise the question, "Must each situation be studied separately?" The answer is "yes." This is dictated by the Whiteheadian notion of process. However, science progresses toward generalities and although every situation is unique, intuitively one can sense that similarities exist between them. The meta-rule is the logical place for these

similarities to be located. Language theorists can develop

their generalizations into meta-rules. A researcher armed with

these meta-rules can then study a specific communication situation

(after it occurs) using the meta-rules as starting points for

discovering the Level I rules (context-specific, real rules),

operating in that situation.

The meta-rule is like a mean and each individual situation

with its Level I rules is like a raw score. The mean doesn't

actually exist, but gets the researcher into the right area.

After the Level I rules are discovered, the worth of a particular

meta-rule can be evaluated by making an intuitive judgement about

how much the Level I rules differ from the meta-rule. Continuing

the analogy of the meta-rule as a mean, we would say that the

richness of a meta-rule increases as the standard deviation of the

Level I rule decreases. (Note that cases may exist where the

Level I rule and the meta-rule are identical, just as a raw score

may fall on the mean. This is by far a minority of cases.)

III Implications

The implications of meta-rules for language in context theorists

are two-fold. First, they correct a philosophical inconsistency

by bringing the rule governed approach to communication into

line with its underlying philosophy of the Whiteheadian notion

of process. Secondly, and of practical consequence to researchers,

they direct attention away from idealized generalities, toward

the primary data of real social interactions.

Meta-rules arise out of generalizations based on observations

of many specific situations. Each one is a mean arising out of

numerous raw scores. We are at the point now, where such a descriptive base of raw scores is sorely needed in the field of communication. In "Conversational Analysis," Nofsinger argues for such observations:

> Communication scholars are constantly immersed in an ocean of data--communication phenomena--but for the most part have not devoted themselves to the careful description of communication acts and episodes...We do not understand communication very well, because we have not carefully observed, described, and interpreted its everyday occurrences....discourse analysis can provide the descriptions and taxonomies which it is the business of theory to explain....This seems to indicate that from a rules perspective, as well as the covering law model, the explanatory machinery which the investigator constructs (whether it be a grammar of communication, a theory, or whatever) presupposes the existance of a data base of observations, descriptions and interpretations. 9

Meta-rules are derived from this data base of observations. They are then turned back toward specific situations to provide guides for discovering the Level I rules in a situation under investigation. Level I rules are discovered and then contribute to the formation of a new data base from which new meta-rules are created, etc.

The term meta-rule implies that there are rules at a level below it. By pointing researchers in the direction of these lower level rules, meta-rules bring language research down to the specific, real world level envisioned by Hawes and Nofsinger. The acceptance of the meta-rule concept implies a central role in communication research for Nofsinger's discourse analysis of specific situations. It implies a great increase in field research and it implies a heavy reliance upon the methodology of participant observation. Most importantly, however, the concept of meta-rules takes the process monkey off of language in context theorists' backs.

Footnotes

[1] For example see: Robin Lakoff, "Language in Context," Language, 48 (1972), 907-972; or John Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 40-53.

[2] David Berlo, The Process of Communication, (New York, 1960), p. 24, quoted in David Smith, "Communication Research and the Idea of Process," Speech Monographs, 39 (1972), 175.

[3] Smith, "Process," 174-82.

[4] Lakoff, "Language," 907-27.

[5] Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality (New York, 1929), pp. 34-35, quoted in Smith, "Process," 175.

[6] Thomas P. Wilson, "Conceptions of Interaction and Forms of Sociological Explanation," Social Interaction, 35 (1970), 701.

[7] Leonard C. Hawes, "The Naturalistic Study of Human Communication: A Naturalistic Perspective," Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, (1975), Houston, Texas, 5.

[8] Hawes, "Naturalistic Study," 5-6.

[9] Robert E. Nofsinger, Jr., "Conversational Analysis," Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, (1975), Houston, Texas, 2-4.