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Implications of a Relativistic Evaluative-Meaning Concept for Persuasive Communication

The Relativistic Evaluative-Meaning Concept

« Evaluative Meaning » (EM) refers to the favorable and unfavorable connotations of linguistic terms. Since Osgood et al. (1957) conceived of EM as one semantic dimension among others of their Semantic-Differential model, EM has usually been regarded as a sort of connotation of the same order as other affective and/or descriptive connotations. This means, for instance, that a glass of beer may be characterized by descriptive attributes regarding temperature (cold), taste (bitter), alcoholic strenght (strong) etc., and in addition by positive or negative evaluative attributes (good or bad) that are considered independent of the descriptive attributes.

Proceeding from a critical review of research relating to the Semantic Differential itself as well as to the role of EM in person perception, certain insufficiencies of the abovementioned EM concept were stressed and an alternative «relativistic» EM concept was suggested (Peeters, 1967 ; 1979). « Evaluation » was no longer regarded as another attribute to be added to the nonevaluative ones, but as a

higher-order construct relating to the (dis)agreement between (a) the descriptive representation of an actual or hypothetical state of affairs considered by the evaluating subject, and (b) the subject's representation of a corresponding optimal state of affairs referred to as the « evaluative standard ». For instance, a subject's evaluative standard about beer may involve descriptive attributes such as cold, bitter and strong. Consequently, the adjectives cold, bitter and strong may endorse positive evaluative meanings for the given subject if they are applied to beer, while warm, sweet and weak would become negative. As the EM's of these adjectives derive from their descriptive meaning-contents, they were called *indirect* EM's. Other qualifiers, however, such as « good » and « bad », were argued to carry *direct* EM's in that they conveyed directly that their referents are in (dis)agreement with the corresponding evaluative standards without involving any descriptive specification. In this way, a « good theory » and a « good meal » share a close agreement with evaluative standards for respectively « theories » and « meals » without having to bear any descriptive resemblance with each other.

The relativistic EM concept has implication for communication. As to *informational* communication — where the sender tries to provide the receiver with some information without necessarily intending to influence the receiver's behavior — it may be evident that descriptive messages (the coffee is cold) may indirectly imply evaluative information (being cold the coffee must be bad) while directly evaluative messages (the coffee is good) may imply indirectly descriptive information (being good, the coffee must be warm). In another paper is shown that the systematic elaboration of these apparently trivial implications in a model is worthwhile to be undertaken and may lead to nonobvious conclusions about the conditions underlying accurate communication (Peeters, 1980). In the present paper we shall not go further on into *informational* communication, but focus on *persuasive* communication where the sender attempts to influence the receiver's behavior or behaviorally relevant states such as attitudes, values, opinions, etc.

Persuasive Communication

Let us consider a persuader P who attempts to persuade another person O to close the door. O may be assumed to engage in behavioral action (closing the door) if within O's cognitive representations there is a discrepancy between the actual state of affairs perceived by O or « percept » (e.g.: an open door) and O's representation of an ideal

optimal state of affairs or « norm » (e.g. : the door should be closed). Notice the analogy between the present psychological concepts of « percept » and « norm » at the one side, and the previous semantic concepts of « descriptive meaning-content » and « evaluative standard » at the other side. This analogy is not fortuitous and even may be argued to be an equivalence if one assumes that the linguistic process that is the « semantic interpretation » of verbal stimuli is, in principle, equivalent to the psychological process that is the perceptual interpretation of nonverbal stimuli (cf. Peeters, 1977).

Proceeding from the concepts of percept and norm, we can distinguish between two main persuasive strategies : direct instigation and evaluative strategies.

Direct Instigation

Typical of direct instigation is that P imposes directly a norm on O in order to make O behave in a way as to establish agreement between his percepts and this norm. A case in point is a command as « Close the door ! » which implies (a) an open door as « percept » shared by P and O, (b) a norm within P according to which the door should be closed, and (c) P imposing this norm on O in order to make him closing the door. Direct instigation may often be ineffective because it may generate reactance in O (Brehm, 1966). Therefore P may proceed in a way as to let O believe that the norm is not really « imposed » but only « suggested ». For instance, P can ask : « Do you close the door » ? By this request O is in principle left free to accept the norm of the closed door. P can also maintain the imperative mood of the command but add a formula as « please » which literally tells that O should only close the door if it « pleases him » or happens to be his own norm as well as P's.

Evaluative Strategies

Instead of pressing O with commands and requests, P can more subtly attempt to convince O by arguments. This means that he tries to create a discrepancy between O's norms and percepts by providing O with new information. This strategy is called « evaluative » because it relies upon evaluative messages. Depending on whether *direct* or *indirect* EM's are involved, two strategies may be distinguished.

1. *Direct evaluative strategies* involve the use of qualifying terms with *direct* EM's. For instance, addressing oneself to O, P may say : « It would be a *good* habit to keep the doors closed ».

2. *Indirect evaluative strategies* are the most subtle ones. They involve P making O aware of a discrepancy between percept and norm by mere informational communication of descriptive messages while avoiding the use of direct evaluative terms. For instance he may just inform O that if the door stays open people in the gangway may overhear the conversation. In this way he may exploit his knowledge of O's norms about privacy in order to make him perceiving the open door as a bad state of affairs and consequently proceeding to close the door.

By way of illustration we shall present a brief analysis of evaluative strategies in a scientific text, viz. the three first paragraphs of «The realm of song» which is a section from an anthropological study of the culture of the American classroom by Jules Henry (1963).

The first paragraph begins with a small section printed in smaller characters and isolated from the rest of the text by extra white space. It provides an evaluatively neutral description of a song period in the classroom that may be readily accepted by the reader as a valid representation of an average classroom situation. It functions clearly as «percept». The corresponding norm follows immediately in the last sentence of the paragraph which is in normal print and integrated in the main text. It tells that the song period aims at (a) broaden the children, and (b) teach them music. The norm is not imposed on the reader. It is that trivial that the reader may accept it as self-evident. Moreover, it looks as if there is no apparent discrepancy between this norm and the percept of the song period.

However, the harmony of the first paragraph is gradually detracted from in the second paragraph. Starting with an *indirect* evaluative strategy, the author points to some descriptive properties of the percept that may be evaluated as discrepant with the norm. For instance, the songs are «pitchless» and even do not meet the musical standards of a so-called primitive tribe. Then the author switches to a *direct* evaluative strategy arguing that the children learn to be musically stupid and to scorn their innate musical abilities. Notice that this negative evaluative escalation involves only part b of the norm (teaching music) while about part a (broaden the children) the author is silent.

The third paragraph displays the same kind of escalation. First, the fact that songs are chosen by the children themselves is presented as a «percept» that seems in agreement with widely accepted norms about learning to share with others or democracy. Then, using an *indirect* evaluative strategy, the author demonstrates that, a.o. because of the harsh competition that is involved, the selection of songs proceeds in a way that is in point of fact inconsistent with the norm. Finally he

switches again to a *direct* evaluative strategy and tells that the first step toward school mental health is the first step in becoming « absurd ».

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