

VERBS OF MENTAL ACTIVITY AND THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION AND MIND

Marina KAIM

Catedra Limbi Germanice

Lucrarea dată reflectă importanța aspectelor sociolingvistice pentru cercetarea verbelor de activitate mentală. Lucrarea abordează atât relațiile intra- și interpersonale în cadrul teoriilor de comunicare, cât și modalitățile de înțelegere ale teoriilor minții și cunoașterii, deasemenea și importanța lor globală pentru verbele de activitate mentală.

Doing research on verbs of mental activity, one should not overlook the sociolinguistic aspects that influence the language use, its main purpose being communicative one. Human communication represents “ an area of multidisciplinary concentration rather than an area existing in isolation from life, social sciences, mathematics, arts, humanities, or other areas of study ...”[1]. Communication process includes various aspects that have links to different fields of study, linguistics being not the last one on the list. Among its [communication] main functions that present an interest for this paper, the following ones are considered the most critical: a. cognitive (which deal with knowledge, beliefs, and intellectual understanding); b. emotive (that are based on the fact that in communication the sender expresses his/her feelings, attitudes, emotions and desires, and this is supposed to call to mind the corresponding states and activities in the receiver; c) practical functions (when the emphasis is on the fact that much communication is used for guiding the behavior of the receiver, i.e. the messages are conveyed in the hope of arousing a readiness in the receiver to act in certain ways [2].

Like the considered in the research on mental activity verbs notions of thinking, knowledge and opinion, communication is both not easy to define, and is under close influence of other domains (psychology, sociology, linguistics, etc.), and should be thereby studied within the interdisciplinary approach. In addition to being difficult to define, it is also hard to study, which is a common issue when you deal with anything related to mental activity sphere, and which is reflected in the use of verbs of mental activity. There (co-) exist different communication theories being sometimes highly compatible with each other, sometimes complementary, and often in sharp contrast...” [3]. Besides, there does not exist uniformity in providing the definition of “communication”, and as mentioned in “Communication Theory. A casebook approach.” by Linda C. Lederman, W. David Gibson, “there is not even anywhere near a consensus on something as seemingly basic as the definition of communication”. The fact that communication is a highly multi-component domain, which has been influenced by other (inter-) related fields (psychology, philosophy, sociology, history, etc.), contributed to the lack of uniformity in communication theory. What is of special interest, however, for the given study, is the importance of taking into consideration both intra- and interpersonal aspects of communication.

Intrapersonal communication, being actually hard to study, presents “the conversation inside our heads”, “communication with oneself” [4], thereby intrapersonal relationships being the connections between the multiple selves, which is well illustrated by the “talking to yourself” fragments, those taking place in our or other people’s heads. Most interesting for this research were found the intra- communication examples elicited from “The Lonely Bones” by Alice Sebold., where the already dead girl “talks” to herself (verbs of mental activity abounding in her “talk” and the novel as a whole) viewing from the heaven on how things are going on below without her:

e.g. “... At some point it began to rain. I could **feel** them [her parents] both **thinking** the same thing then, but neither of them said it. That I was out there somewhere, in the rain...”

e.g. I **knew** where my body was, but I could not tell them. I watched and waited to **see** what they would **see**.

e.g. It would be some time before I **realized** what you’ve undoubtedly already assumed, that I wasn’t the first girl he’d killed. He **knew** to remove my body from the field. He **knew** to watch the weather and to kill an arc of light-to-heavy precipitation because that would rob the police of evidence. But he was not as fastidious as the police liked to **think**.

What happens during the main character of the mentioned book character’s talk is the example of “self talk” (intrapersonal communication, connection between the multiple selves), which in turn is a form of discourse, not that much different from the discourse between, for instance, two people (interpersonal communication).

Interpersonal communication, like communication per se and intrapersonal communication, is difficult to define. It differs from other forms of communication in that there are few participants involved, when the interlocutors are in close physical proximity to each other, many sensory channels are used, and feedback is immediate. Presenting person-to-person contact, interpersonal communication includes everyday exchange that may be formal or informal and can take place anywhere by means of words, sounds, facial expression, gestures etc. Not overlooking the “intrapersonal/self” component, it should be mentioned that the individual in interpersonal communication is the “presenting self” of the multiple selves comprising that whole system of self. In this research, we support the approach posited by Lederman who highlights that interpersonal communication is more efficiently studied when taking into account the intrapersonal communication that accompanies interpersonal communication. As proposed by Mead, the structure of self is a reflection of the entire social process; self as a multivariate structure that arises from all social experience [5].

Communication theory should be perceived as an ongoing process, i.e. taking into consideration both what has been done and something that people do on an ongoing basis, and thereby relate to the most essential matters in our everyday life. Coming back to the interconnection of different disciplines that influence the process of communication, one cannot but consider that the influence, for example, of sociology is felt in many communication studies where such sociological variables as sex or gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. are felt to influence how a given communication situation develops.

While doing research in verbs of mental activity, one should not overlook also the issues related to the so-called naïve/folk theories of mind/knowledge, those driving our everyday lives. To contribute to deeper study of mental verbs and their structure, a number of researches have been done examining the folk/naïve theories (concepts) of knowing/mind by different scholars (e.g. D’Andrade [6], Rips and Conrad [7], Hoskens and DeBoeck [8], Premack, Wierzbicka, Whiten, Perner, Woodruff, Bennet, Dennet etc.). It is generally believed that people are aware of their own and others’ psychological/mental states that comprise the so called commonsense (view), or folk, psychology.

Keesing defines the term “folk model” as “culturally constructed common sense” regarding a domain. Bruner mentions that all cultures have as one of their most powerful constitutive arguments a *folk psychology*, saying that “...we learn our culture folk psychology early, as we learn language early, and the processes are inextricably linked.” Enlarging on his statement, Goddard and Wierzbicka [9] add that his claims “allow us to state that “... the universal ‘theory of mind’ includes the following major constituents: *think, know, want, and feel...*”, i.e. verbs of mental activity that present a special interest for the given research.

In general lines, “theory of mind” (ToM) is defined in psychology as the ability to accredit mental states to others and to oneself (e.g. Premack [10]). Doing this is referred to as ‘mind-reading’ or ‘mentalizing’ and it is seen as being essential to both self-reflection (intrapersonal related issues) and coordinated social action (interpersonal ones). The ToM framework presents the development of philosophical cognitivism and especially of the conception of ‘folk psychology’, which enables us to understand that mental states can be the cause of our and others’ behavior. It also displays the fact that one should realize that reality is viewed in different ways by different people, and that we should be able to perceive and maintain different mental representations of the world simultaneously (which goes in line with the closely intertwined mental processes and is reflected in the use of verbs of mental activity), such representations being not directly observable.

Theory of mind (TOM) can be also perceived as the innate potential ability in humans, requiring, though, certain social and other experiences to bring successfully to adult development. It may be considered as a continuum, when different people may develop more or less, effective theories of mind. Current discussions of ToM reflect on the related philosophical debates considering the science of the mind (Descartes, etc.). The most well-known recently are two approaches to ToM in philosophy, i.e. theory-theory and simulation theory. The first one follows the actual “folk psychology”, which is used to reason about others’ minds, and is posited to develop automatically and innately, backed up by social interactions, the mental states being viewed as unobservable. Simulation theory suggests that ToM, basically, is not theoretical. In general terms, regarding the main differences between the two theories one can trace that the first approach, i.e. theory-theory, describes ToM as a detached (standing apart) theoretical process, an innate feature, while simulation theory views it [ToM] as a kind of knowledge that allows us to imitate the mental state of another person.

In the process of ToM study and development a number of researches were focused (especially during the early period of ToM development) on infants’ skill at interpreting the nonverbal aspects. It was based on such

an evident fact that people often consider other people's facial expressions and gestures etc. as clues to their mental life. Actually, a great deal of research on the early development of a theory of mind has focused on that aspect. However, in contrast to any other species, human beings are also able to talk to each other about their mental lives, discuss their feelings, compare their beliefs, and share their plans and intentions. Therefore, it is considered of importance to consider the verbal aspect first.

In developmental psychology, theory of mind is a basic understanding of how the mind works and how it influences our behavior and actions. Within the philosophy of mind, a mental state is viewed as the kind of state or process that is unique to humans, who are thinking and feeling beings, which can be demonstrated, for example, through the propositional attitude. The latter is generally defined as the relational mental state connecting a person to a proposition (which can be true or false respectively). Another popular topic of debate is related to the age starting with which the theory of mind “appears” in children (the age especially considered in such discussions covering 3-5 years old). Rips and Conrad [11] studied naïve theories of mind by examining the form of people's judgments regarding distinctions between mental verbs. Among the most important findings were the following. There was a basic distinction that respondents made between what Rips and Conrad called analytic verbs (e.g. verbs of knowing) and non-analytic verbs. Another important conclusion made was that for many verb pairs, the participants judged one activity to be a part of the other while at the same time judging the second activity to be a kind of the first. Thus, thinking was judged to be a part of conceptualizing, while conceptualizing was judged to be a kind of thinking. It proves again the fact that mental verbs possess an unusual relationship not typically found in real world objects, and reflect the interconnection of verbs of mental activity as a result of the interrelation of different unobservable mental processes taking place in our mind. To that end, *think* was attested as the central verb in common with most mental verbs, i.e. of thinking, knowing, opinion etc.

Paula J. Schwanenflugel et al in “The organization of Mental Verbs and Folk Theories of Knowing” [12] reflect on the study of folk theories of knowing in North American adults by examining the organization of mental verbs. The folk theory of mind displayed was naïve information processing model with interactive and constructive components. The study examined the organizational features of a representative sample of mental verbs of knowing. As a result of the study, 30 verbs were identified that at least 8 out of 10 experts agreed were representative ways of knowing or coming to know something, among them such verbs as *figure out, guess, know, learn, remember, think, understand*. Results of the research in the cross-cultural commonality and variation in folk theories of knowing studied by examining the organization of verbs of knowing in German and Japanese adults are reflected in “The organization of verbs of knowing: Evidence for cultural commonality and variation in theory of mind” article [13]. Similar approach to studying the language of mental activities has been also applied by other researchers. D'Andrade [14], using the interview methods, worked with several naïve informants regarding their conceptions of mental verbs. On the basis of these interviews, the author noted that English verbs can be categorized into six types: perceptions verbs, the ones of belief/knowledge, feeling/emotions, desires/wishes, intentions, and resolutions. Each of these types of verbs is posited to have: a) a state aspect in which the mind is treated as a container that is in various states and b) a process aspect in which the mind is carrying on certain operation.

The study made by Hoskens and DeBoeck [15] asked a group of Belgian participants to sort out 49 verbs of intelligence into groups with nearly identical meanings. The results showed that adult conceptions of mental activities centered around such themes as: (a) influence of memory in various activities, (b) the role of attention processes in regulating input from the external world, and (c) the role of cognitive meditation in connecting the contents of memory and input from the external world. The purpose of that study was to study people's conception of ways of knowing or coming to know something by studying their organization of mental verbs. Hoskens and DeBoeck examined a diverse set of mental verbs of knowing, focusing on relatively early acquired mental verbs. Thereby, through examining the similarity of mental verbs in the way that people extend or do not extend the verbs across contexts, the data regarding the conceptual similarity of mental verbs in terms of their use in the real world can be collected.

Dealing with the matters related to native/folk theories of mind, one cannot overlook the ethno-theories of person-associated issues. One of the dimensions of cross-linguistic variation in ways of talking about thinking (as well as thinking about thinking) considers different ethno-theories of the person. The semantics of the “non-bodily aspects of the person” (sometimes called “psycho-collocations” or “PSI-words”) often include

think, as well as *feel*, *know*, i.e. verbs of mental activity. In accordance with the natural semantic method (NSM) studies, the semantics of the expressions that concern “non-bodily aspects of the person”, and the correspondingly different “models” of the person they represent, vary greatly from culture to culture. To illustrate the kind of semantic variation which is attested we can contrast, for example, English and Russian. Interpretation of “mind” in English and Russian can serve as good illustration of such semantic contrast.

The modern English concept of mind presents a highly culture-specific concept. Among the key ethno psychological constructs in different languages, C. Goddard includes the one of mind/spirit in English and Russian, in English: mind, spirit/ soul, head, heart, and in Russian: «душа» (‘soul’)/ ‘сердце’- ‘heart’ respectively.

Thus, “mind” in English can be presented as follows: a) one of two parts of a person; b) people cannot see it; people cannot touch it; c) because of this part, a person can think; d) because of this part, a person can know things. The given interpretation reflects, the “split” of the person into two parts, the mind being the invisible and immaterial part, as well as the fact that mind is conceptually focused on thinking and knowing, rather than on feeling or wanting. To say that someone has a good mind would suggest that a person can think. Cognitive functions are not altogether excluded: one can know or say things ‘in one’s heart’ so long as these things are linked with values and feelings. Also included in the domain of the «душа» is the human will, is in the expression “душевная сила”- ‘spiritual strength, strength of character’. These and other considerations suggest a semantic structure as in C. Goddard’s article regarding «душа» in Russian: a) one of two parts of a person; b) people cannot see it, people cannot touch it; c) because of this part, people are not like other living things; d) because of this part, many things can happen inside a person; e) these things can be good, these things can be bad; f) because of this part, a person can feel many things; g) other people cannot know what these things are if the person doesn’t want them to know it; h) it is good if a person wants other people to know it; i) because of this part, a person can be a good person.

Following Goddard and other NSM supporters, the discussed above multifaceted ethno psychological concept “mind”/ «душа», presents an “ethno-theory of the person”. As can be judged by the provided illustration, both ethno-theories are basically dualistic, nevertheless, in Russian, lexicon opposes the body to a psychological entity which is unpredictable, emotional, spiritual, expressive and moral, while in English the basic dualism is focused on intellectual and rational aspects. The ethno-theories related aspects should be taken into account every time this or that verb is analyzed, in that way contributing to better understanding of the verbs of mental activity and the role they play in communication.

The considered above sociolinguistics related issues associated with the given research on verbs of mental activity included such important aspects as intra- and interpersonal relations, native theories of mind/ knowledge, as well as acquisition of mental verbs by children. The main conclusions one can draw based on the information presented, are as follows.

Intra- and interpersonal communication, being a constituent of communication theory, cannot be overlooked while dealing with mental verbs study. Intrapersonal communication, alike mental verbs associated matters, is hard to study, as it presents the communication between our “self”- s, which takes place in our brain, and cannot be, therefore, “visible”. It is of special importance, though, to the mental verbs better understanding and treatment, to take into consideration that this important “brick” of communication should not be overlooked when dealing with concrete examples of mental verbs use in texts/situations, etc. Interpersonal communication, in turn, is more efficiently considered when the intrapersonal component that accompanies the former, is taken into account. It has been also highlighted that communication theory, and intra- & interpersonal communication as its main components, should be viewed through interdisciplinary perspective.

The issues related to the so-called naïve or folk theories of mind/ knowledge should be taken into consideration while doing research in verbs of mental activity. In general lines, theory of mind (ToM) is perceived as the ability to recognize mental states to oneself and others. What is of special importance for our research, is the thing that through the ToM studies, a number of mental verbs related conclusions have been observed. For example, the fact that mental verbs’ relations/ interconnections are based on the interrelations of “invisible” mental processes that take place in our mind, has been also reflected in the evidence that thinking was judged by the studies’ participants to be a part of conceptualizing, while the latter in turn was judged to be a part of thinking. As stated by Goddard and Wierzbicka, such major constituents as think, know, want, feel (i.e. mental verbs), make a part of the “universal theory of mind”. The ToM studies’ aspects also reflect on the fact that reality is, in fact, perceived in different ways by different people. It, in turn, hints that we should be able to

perceive and maintain different mental representations of the world simultaneously, such representations being not directly observable, which is reflected in the use of verbs of mental activity as well.

Another important point mentioned deals with the role that ethno theories play in dealing with mental verbs study. The way in which the ethno psychological concept (e.g. “mind”) is treated in different languages and cultures, matters when it comes to verbs of mental activity examples examination. Taking into account the ethno theories related aspects while analyzing mental verbs, contributes to their better understanding and use.

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