Book note on John Wilson, On the Boundaries of Conversation

Barbara Johnstone
Review
Reviewed Work(s): On the Boundaries of Conversation by John Wilson
Review by: Barbara Johnstone
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attribute to the French speakers are mirror images of each other, while the actual responses of the French speakers are in between, is interpreted by Persoons as proof that the Dutch speakers try to justify their aggressive attitude by projecting it onto the other community. Persoons further shows that the Flemish students’ attitudes are situationally determined: the more the interviewer is perceived to be a member of the other group (from monolingual Dutch via accommodating and gallicized to monolingual French), the more radical the attributed responses are.

Van Bezoornen’s paper stands out by its sophisticated way of ferreting out the contribution that different objective speech characteristics make to a number of attributions by different linguistic groups. In a first experiment it was shown that the subjects who had listened to three versions of a set of recordings (integral, with lowpass filtering, and with random splicing) rated speakers more reliably on personality when the recording left prosody intact, and more reliably on intelligence and SES when pronunciation was left intact. A second experiment showed that voice quality was relatively more important for foreigners than for native speakers, and that pronunciation (regional accent) played no role for foreign listeners but played an important role in the attribution of intelligence and SES by all native speakers, and in the attribution of negative personality traits by native speakers of the same dialect as in the recording.

The first paper of the second half of the book, by A. Kerhoff, R. van Hout & T. Vallen, echoes some of these findings: prestige and attractiveness are two factors that play a separate role in attitudes toward standard Dutch. The originality of their contribution consists of simultaneous comparisons between Mediterranean minorities’ attitudes toward both the standard majority language and the dialect, and between attitudes toward the standard majority language of both dialect speakers and Mediterranean minorities. Unfortunately, there seems to be some confusion in the paper between statistical prediction and real-world causation in the discussion of the role that shame for the native language plays in the second-language acquisition process. Moreover, some of the tables and figures in this contribution are impossible to interpret without constant reference to the text.

The originality of A. Vermeer’s paper, which also deals with the acquisition of Dutch as a second language by Mediterranean minorities, resides in the style of presentation rather than in the research methodology itself. The relationship between a host of variables at six different points in time is visualized in one schema, which is difficult to absorb, especially as the structure of this schema is different from the structure of the corresponding text.

The last two contributions provide an interesting confrontation of two different explanations for why the correlations found between language attitude and language use are often so low: K. Jaspert & S. Koon argue that attitude is not a mental construct, but an intermediate variable between social factors and behavior. Unfortunately, their argument is based on path analyses of data from rather crudely operationalized attitude measurements (as the authors admit). If their findings could be corroborated by other data, however, they would be a strong argument for replacing attitude data by direct measures of social factors (which would probably have a much higher reliability in the first place). H. Münstermann and R. van Hout provide a more mundane explanation of the discrepancy between attitude and use: statistical problems, viz. heteroscedasticity and false assumptions of linearity in regression analyses. It is somewhat ironic that this obvious point should only be raised in the last paper, while other contributions do not mention, for instance, whether their data were visually inspected for linearity.

After reading this volume one can only conclude that the problem of the discrepancy between attitude and behavior and between different attitude measures is far from resolved. The book provides an impressive array of suggestions for methodological improvement, however, which makes it stimulating reading, even for researchers not particularly interested in the Dutch language area. While the book does not provide a global picture of language attitudes in this area (even contributors dealing with related topics hardly refer to each other), the individual papers are clearly of a more homogeneous quality than is usually the case when a variety of contributions are collated under a geographic label. [Robert De Keyser, University of Pittsburgh.]

Wilson sets out to answer a potentially interesting question: What is ‘conversation’, and how does it differ from other kinds of talk? After pointing out that, in pragmatics and conversation analysis, the term ‘conversation’ is typically not clearly delimited, W attempts to provide a delimitation in terms of a ‘Speaking Rights Theory’ (SRT) of conversation. Though his SRT is intended as ‘part of a broader argument which suggest[s] that all speech events might be distinguished from each other in relation to a differential distribution of rights to talk’ (92), W deals only with conversation, maintaining that conversation is characterized by equal distribution of speaking rights among participants.

W repeatedly confuses description and definition. For example, a type of speaking turn called an ‘out-mode’ and defined functionally on p. 56 is found, as reported on p. 58, often to be in the imperative; then, on p. 59, ‘out-modes are defined as being in the imperative mood’. In the same way, it is unclear whether W’s SRT of conversation represents an empirical or a theoretical claim. If the former, the claim is inaccurate: the speech event normally referred to as ‘conversation’ often includes talk in which speaking rights are not equally distributed. Joking and banter, for example, which W explicitly excludes, are typically thought of as being parts of conversations.

If W’s claim is a theoretical one, one wonders why such a claim is needed. It is true, as W shows through his analyses of topic initiation, topic maintenance, ‘out-moding’, and imperatives, that there are times when speaking rights are equally distributed, and that participants accordingly need, and find, ways of determining what to talk about and ways of getting others to talk which do not upset this distribution. For example, there are times when a speaker cannot say, ‘Now we’ll talk about X’, so other ways of initiating topic X have to be found. But while the distribution of speaking rights can help explain some choices speakers make, it is doubtful that it can explain all choices. W’s reduction of Dell Hymes’ rich, multidimensional notion of the speech event to the single dimension of the relationship between participants would appear to be a step in the wrong direction, unless it can be much more clearly motivated.

The book appears to have received no editing whatsoever. Misspellings and mispunctuations are too numerous to list; references are cited in the text but not the bibliography, and vice versa: sentences are often fragments, run-ons, or nonsense; ‘torturous’ is used for ‘tortuosity’ (35) and ‘argumentation’ for ‘augmentation’ (93); percentages are given without indication of what they are percentages of (80); and, in a passage which could be very funny in another context, W uses italics which he himself added as evidence for a claim about the prosody of a transcribed excerpt from another scholar’s data (94–95).

To quote from W (4), ‘There is still the issue that even if one accepts that a clearer definition of conversation, where it is employed as a technical term for an individual type of talk, would be useful, whether there is a need for a complete book on the subject.’ The answer, to the extent that the sentence can be parsed, appears in this case to be ‘no’. [BARBARA JOHNSTONE, Texas A&M University.]