gestalt theory

Relations and Structures in Language and Communication

- The Internal Structure of Dialogues
- „Conversational Happiness" and Praegnanz
- Relationships between Structures of Language and Structures of Visual Perception

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THE STRUCTURE OF DIALOGICAL SYNTONY

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Introduction

Our paper sets out to analyse some aspects of "syntonic" conversation, integrating theoretical trends and empirical research. The syntony we will be referring to is understood as the expression of an agreement between two or more participants in a conversation. This expression of agreement is intersubjectively noticeable and regards not so much the subject of the discourse as the interactional behaviour and attitudes demonstrated reciprocally by the interlocutors. The *dialogical syntony*[2] will not be concerned with the *content* of the conversation but rather with its *form*, seen as an important medium for messages about the relational level and interpersonal perception.

We will illustrate the results of an empirical study (Riccioni 2005) aimed at showing how attuning at a dialogical level can be *perceived* and recognised as a complex and self-organised Gestalt. In particular, this study shows a number of factors inter-reacting dynamically and reciprocally which seem to contribute to the perception of attuning, or lack of it, in a conversation. Two of these factors will be analysed in depth, namely the uncommon instance of overlapping in speech and the use of ironic and humorous expressions.

Finally, we will attempt to demonstrate how and in what sense dialogical syntony can be related to the Gestalt concept of *Prägnanz* (Wertheimer 1912, 1923; Koffka 1935; Kanizsa G. & Luccio R. 1986; Kanizsa 1991; Luccio 2003, 2005).

1.Dialogical Syntony

We define the concept of *dialogical syntony as a form of attuning, of understanding, of convergence possible between two or more interlocutors on the interactional and relational level, but leaving out of consideration agreement on the content level* (Riccioni 2005).

We will describe the most important results of empirical research which focuses on *the way in which dissent is spoken of.* One of the fundamental hypotheses of the study concerns the fact that an external observer can perceive the "good form" of a conversation and the "good relations" between the interlocutors, even though they are expressing different or conflicting opinions. The basic assumption of the research concerns the *observability* of dialogical syntony in a read and/or heard text, without the back-up of any extra-textual information (the setting, intra and interpersonal

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[2] We use the term *syntony*, instead of *attuning*, to avoid any overlapping with the espression *discourse attuning*, used by Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood (1988). Likewise, in order to indicate the lack of dialogical syntony, we choose the expression dystonia. Often, in this paper, we also use the term "attuning" in a generic sense (as harmony, consonance, agreement).

context etc.), simply by observing the *surface* of conversation (Orletti 1994; Mizzau 2002) and by using our *"ingenuous" communicative skills.*

2. Description and Basic Results of the Study

The chief aims of our research are to show how a sample of observers-listeners can: 1) *perceive dialogical syntony at an immediate level* and 2) *identify some observable indicators of dialogical syntony* (linguistic, paralinguistic, meta-linguistic, textual, intonational etc.)

As a basic result, dialogical syntony is seen as a global quality which appears to impose itself on the observer-listener. As we shall see from the Gestalt Theory perspective, the phenomenon could be seen as a perceptive, dynamic and multi-dimensional configuration, tending towards *Prägnanz.*

Finally, the data seems to confirm research carried out in the framework of Communication Accomodation Theory (Giles & Smith 1979; Coupland 1991; Giles & Coupland, 1991), in particular underlining the effects of the dynamics of attuning and interactional convergence-divergence on the perceived quality of the relations.

2.1 Sample, Instrument and Procedure

The study was conducted on a sample of 100 students (69 female and 31 male university students between the ages of 22 and 25). The experiment required students to answer 10 questions on a printed questionnaire[3], after listening to audio recordings of two natural ordinary conversations.[4] The two conversations were chosen on the basis that, although they had an analogous dialogic and thematic[5] structure, they also differed notably with regard to the interactional-relational attitudes they expressed. Moreover, in both cases the interlocutors involved demonstrate reciprocal dissent with regards to the content, expressing quite different opinions on the same problem. The data from the questionnaires was transcribed, codified and analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

2.2. Results of the Quantitative Analysis. The Perception of Syntony/Dystonia in the Conversations

The quantitative analysis confirmed the hypotheses, demonstrating that the first conversation listened to by the students was perceived as dystonic by a significant majority (89%); only 15% found it syntonic. The second conversation was recognised as syntonic by 79% of the students; dystonic by 15%. 6% of the sample did not express

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[3] The students answered the following 4 questions relating to each dialogue: 1) *Does the dialogue seem syntonic or dystonic?*; 2) *Why?*; 3) *Are there any linguistic features in the text which in your opinion have contributed to giving this impression of dialogical syntony or dystonia? If so, which?*; 4) *On a scale of 1 to 10 what grade of attuning can you recognize in the dialogue between the two interlocutors?* Two further questions asked the students explicitly to make a comparison between the two conversations.

[4] The chief limitation of the material given out is that it does not allow us to take into account kinesic and proxemic factors that we think could be very important for determining the impression of attuning or dis-sonance in a *vis à vis* conversation.

[5] In both cases it is a typical *troubles talk* conversation (see Riccioni in this number).

a clear opinion about the perceived level of attuning. The majority of students gave the first conversation a grade of attuning between 5 and 3, while the second, the grades were around 8-7. Finally, it is interesting to note that in the question which required the students to make an explicit comparison between the two conversations, 90% of them defined the second as more syntonic than the first.

2.3. Results of the Qualitative Analysis. The Indicators of Syntony/Dystonia

The most important result of the qualitative analysis regards the definition of some possible *conditions for dialogical syntony*. The qualitative analysis was carried out on the replies to questions 2 and 3 in which students were asked to give their judgement of the attuning and dissonance expressed in the two dialogues. A summary of the qualitative analysis data shows that the information given by the students converges so as to draw a fairly precise picture of the *conditions for syntonic conversation*, both on the positive side ("favouring" factors) and on the negative side ("hindering" factors). A *model of dialogical syntony* (although incomplete and temporary[6],) appears to emerge from the data. This model consists of heterogeneous factors (linguistic, paralinguistic, prosodic, intonational etc.): 1) *the limited use of speech overlapping* (above all if not supportive); 2) *conversational coherence*, above all at a dialogical level, such as continuity of themes between adjacent turns of different speakers; 3) *conversational cohesion*, such as fluidity and lack of fragmentation, at both the dialogical level (between different speakers' turns) and monological level (within the turns of the same speaker); 4) the *similarity* between interlocutors as regards tone, vocal pitch and speech rhythms; the constancy and continuity as regards tone, vocal pitch and speech rhythms; 5) the *constancy*, the continuity as regards tones, vocal pitch and speech rhythms; 6) the *similarity* in style and linguistic register between interlocutors; 7) the use of *discourse markers* that indicate *agreement, negotiation, request for attention* and *involvement* (e.g. "yes", "maybe", "do you see?" etc.).

For some, the use of *irony* can also be included in the conditions favouring the impression of syntony. The *even distribution of speech* between the two interlocutors and *agreement on the content level*[7] are not among the determining factors.

3. Dialogical Attuning and Prägnanz

If we borrow terminology and concepts from the Gestalt theory we can consider dialogical syntony as *a global and immediate impression that can be produced from a stimulating complex constellation made up of factors of a different nature which interact among themselves*. A syntonic conversation can be seen as a Gestalt which imposes itself on the observer-listener, a dynamic, multi-dimensional, perceptive configuration which tends towards *Prägnanz* and *good form*.

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[6] Given the breadth and nature of the sample, the number and characteristics of the conversations examined etc.

[7] What is described is the general tendency as seen in the sample. A careful examination of the question-naires however, shows the emergence of two different conceptions of dialogical syntony, which imply two different relational and inter-relational models. One, which is clearly prevalent. favours the value of listening, attention, acceptance and understanding; the other attributes greater importance to factors such as the participation and emotional involvement of the confidant. (see Riccioni 2005).

Taking up Metzger's (1982) proposal to generalize the principle and extend the field of observation beyond visual perception, we will try to point out some analogies between our model and the characteristics of *prägnant* configurations in the Gestalt model. In this paper, we cannot go back over the various formulations, integrations and criticisms of the Prägnanz principle in the Gestalt literature starting from the first enunciation by Wertheimer (1912). We will limit ourselves, therefore, to mentioning a selection of definitions of the concept which permit us to find points of contact with our dialogical syntony model.

Regularity, uniformity and *symmetry* (e.g. regarding linguistic register, tones and speech rhythms), *unity* (e.g. dialogical sharing and co-operation), *good continuation* and *closure* (e.g. dialogical coherence) and *simplicity* (morphological) are perceived by students as favouring factors of the impression of attuning and "good relations" These qualities could be linked up with Koffka's definition of Prägnanz (1935, 110; 178) Similar ideas can be found in Kanizsa (1988), particularly as regards *order, coherence and reciprocal "belonging"*. It is clear that our dialogical syntony model implies that the phenomenon can be "gradable", in relation to the extent in which favouring and hindering factors interact in any given conversation (Kanizsa 1988, 104).

4. Overlapping

Before beginning to write about the *limited use* of *non supportive overlapping* as one of the conditions identified by the students as typical of *syntonic communication*, we must define in which the terms (1) *overlapping* and (2) the adjective *non supportive* are used.

While the term overlapping is used by the students to cover a fairly wide range of meaning, it can be made to coincide with the PTI concept, in other words, with every speech act performed by the overlapping speaker (P2) outside his/her own conversational space, (or while P1 is the current speaker); cf. Bongelli in this number). The adjective *non supportive* (or competitive, both adjectives antonymous to supportive) which is coupled with the term overlapping is used by the students to describe, in general terms, intrusive interventions which they identified as negative. This applies on the content level as well as on the intentional level, that is the wish to steal the speakership from the speaker whose turn it is.[8]

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[8] The distinction between supportive and competitive interventions has raised numerous doubts. As of today, there are many scholars who prefer not to use this classification (cf., e.g. Bazzanella 1995) as they consider the supportive and competitive characteristics of an intervention to be matters connected with the *interpretation* of the individual parties towards whom the intervention is directed. However, in our opinion, this dichotomy seems to be intrinsically ambiguous as the verbs to support and compete can be used: a) with reference to acts of a person who, in fairly explicit ways, declares him/herself to be in total or partial agreement or disagreement with what their conversational partner has stated (that is with the content); b) to indicate the intentions of the interlocutors to support, back up the speakership of the other person or. on the contrary, to compete in order to take over the speakership themselves. In the case of the latter, we are dealing with extremely interpretative categories although some Authors have identified some linguistic and intonational markers for distinguishing between two types of intention. Among these Authors are Jefferson (1984), French and Local (1983).

In our opinion, if the PTI (cf. Bongelli in this number) establish ways of self-expression, i.e. ways used by the interlocutors for self-affirmation; so from the psychological and conversational[9] viewpoint, it should not surprise us that in a *communicative script*[10] like the one presented: a) a limited use of PTI is seen by the students to be an *indicator* of *syntony*, while; b) conversely, if PTI are used a great deal, they are seen to be *indicators* of *dystonia*.

In both the conversations given to the students, the female interlocutor[11] who tells another person about her existential problem has presumably taken on for herself the role of narrator, thus contemporaneously inviting the other to take on a role complementary to her own. The use of PTI (by the narrator and even more by the other) is capable, however, of subverting this order/organization.

In Gestalt terms, we could aver that as the PTI or non supportive overlapping (to use the students' terminology) acts not only on the communicated content but also on **conversational roles**[12], it imposes **changes and interruptions** on the course of the conversation. It does not allow the interlocutors adequate negotiation of these roles and thus contravenes the principles of good continuation and closing. It causes the conversation to depart from unity, regularity, uniformity and symmetry, in other words, from good form.

We believe that perceptive regularity, uniformity and symmetry can be expressed in conversational terms as having the tendency to: a) **co-operation**, i.e. the tendency to interact in an orderly fashion so as to interpret a script unanimously, *explore intersubjectivity, become attuned and strike up a dialogue* (Di Giovanni 2007, 299); b) **co-ordination**, i.e. the tendency to build conversational sequences together by taking it in turns; c) **politeness**, i.e. the tendency to protect the relationship and interlocutor. *The fact that each one calmly awaits his/her turn to speak is, in itself, a mitigating factor* (Di Giovanni 2007, 299)

The PTI, especially the non supportive type, since they disregard each of the principles listed above, contribute to rendering the interaction: a) disorderly, i.e. non linear, unitary and not working towards a joint interpretation of the script; b) uncoordinated from the point of view of turn-taking and sequence building; c) impolite, i.e. not inclined to mitigation and respect for speaking in turn.

5. The Use of Humour in Syntonic Conversations

The model presented above refers to serious conversations[13]. The characteristics

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[9] Cf. Mizzau (2002, 121-122).

[10] Cf. Goffman (1959, 1981).

[11] As the roles are constantly (re)negotiated in the course of a conversation, generally speaking, the conversant who intends to narrate shows his/her desire to do so through specific pre-sequences, i.e. prefaces to the story, cf. Sacks 1978.

[12] The compulsion – the pleasure – we have in speaking seems to exceed that of listening. This induces us to push over the limits and impose our discourse using terms such as: "whereas I" or "me too, actually", so that through what appears to be an act of consensus we take over the space in order to substitute our story for that of the other. Mizzau (2002, 121).

[13] In this paragraph the term "serious" has to be considered as "non-humorous" and as opposed to the word "unserious"

found by using empirical methodology have to be considered as signals that indicate dialogical attuning. Among these, there is irony, which belongs to the broader category of humour. Irony and humour can be assimilated into the same category because they share the same structure. This structure is based essentially on two main elements: Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism (Raskin 1985; Attardo & Raskin 1991; Attardo 2001)[14]. A Script is a "large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it" (Raskin 1985, 81). Humorous texts are based on the switch between two scripts that seem unrelated so that they produce an incongruity. The Logical Mechanism is the element that allows the switch and which is also the resolution of the incongruity. Therefore, the Logical Mechanism can be considered as the link, which usually remains implicit, between the two scripts.

Obviously, there are several differences between humorous and serious interactions; first of all, from the linguistic point of view, the presence or absence of Script Opposition and the Logical Mechanism.

Moreover, from the meta-communicative point of view, the strategies used by speakers to build the humorous or serious frame of their conversation differ. On the one hand, serious interactions are usually signalled by the tone of voice and the serious content of the conversation. On the other hand, humorous interactions need more signals that indicate the humorous frame of the conversation. These elements give information about the meta-communicative level of the interaction (see Canestrari in press for a list of meta-communicative humorous signals[15]), in other words, they meta-communicate the message "this is play" (Bateson 1972).

Finally, from the psychological point of view, a different cognitive process is involved in serious and unserious interactions. By joking, a speaker invites the interlocutor into a cognitive process (Hay 2001), which can be defined as a sort of intelligence test (Norrick 1993). The process is composed of recognition, understanding, appreciation of the joke and agreement with the joker. It is clear that serious conversations are not based on such steps.

Up to now I have distinguished serious and humorous interactions from a theoretical point of view. Naturally, performances can show a mixture of the two kinds of interactions: a serious conversation can contain some humorous examples as long as there are not too many. When a speaker uses irony or other forms of humour in his serious speech, the syntonic signals are not the same as those in the rest of the conversation, which is serious. In other words the switch from a serious to a humorous syntonic frame implies some changes:

1) coherence is implicit in humorous interactions due to the Script Opposition that creates an incongruity; the addressee of the joke has the cognitive task of discovering its solution or, in other words, finding the Logical Mechanism that gives coherence to the two opposing scripts;

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[14] According to the General Theory of Verbal Humor a text can be said to be humorous if it contains two fundamental Knowledge Resources: Script Opposition and Logical Mechanism. The remaining Knowledge Resources of a humorous text are: Language, Situation, Target and Narrative Strategies.

[15] Just to give an idea, laughing is probably the most common humorous signal, but there are several others.

2) the meta-communicative signals that can be used in humorous interactions can be more than the serious tone of voice and serious content that indicate a non-humorous conversation (Canestrari in press);

3) similarity and continuity of the tone of voice, speech rhythm and the pitch range used by speakers are syntonic signals characteristic of serious conversations but not typical of humorous ones. For example, laughing in response to a joke is at variance with this similarity and continuity.

The above is an exemplificative but not exhaustive list of the all differences between humorous and serious syntonic signals. The switch from one frame to another should be considered from a micro-analytical point of view as a switch from serious to humorous syntonic signals or vice versa. In conclusion, humorous and serious interactions are *Gestalten* with different linguistic, meta-communicative and psychological structures which are expressed by using various signals[16].

Summary

The aim of this paper is to single out some characteristics (favouring and hindering factors) of syntonic conversations considered as Gestalten. First of all, we showed an empirical research aimed at underlining the fact that syntonic conversations are perceived as Gestalten. Secondly, we focused on the analogies between syntonic conversations and Gestalten in terms of *Prägnanz*, symmetry, regularity, simplicity and continuity. Thirdly, we considered two syntonic signals among those found: overlapping speech and humour.

From the psychological and conversational viewpoints, overlapping is considered as behaviour relating to self-expression. The lack or the poor presence of overlapping increases the levels of co-ordination, co-operation and politeness on which syntonic conversations are built.

Humour is considered as a strategy used by speakers to enrich the syntonic level of their interaction. The use of a humorous example in a conversation produces a switch from a serious to a humorous frame, so that the characteristics that occur in a serious syntonic frame change, but the syntonic level of the interaction remains.

Keywords: Dialogical syntony, Prägnanz, overlapping, humour.

Zusammenfassung

Die Absicht dieser Arbeit ist es, einige Merkmale (begünstigende und hemmende Faktoren) abgestimmter Unterhaltungen, die als Gestalten betrachtet werden können, heraus zu arbeiten. Als erstes zeigten wir eine empirische Studie, die belegen soll, dass abgestimmte Gespräche als Gestalten wahrgenommen werden. Im zweiten Schritt konzentrierten wir uns auf die Analogien zwischen abgestimmten Gesprächen und Gestalten in Bezug auf Prägnanz, Symmetrie, Regelmäßigkeit, Einfachheit und Kontinuität. Drittens wählten wir aus den aufgefundenen abgestimmten Signalen zwei für weitere Erwägungen aus: überlappende Rede und Humor.

Vom psychologischen und vom Gesprächs-Gesichtspunkt wird ein Überschneiden der Rede als Verhaltensweise, die mit Selbstausdruck verbunden ist, betrachtet. Das geringe Vorkommen oder überhaupt die Abwesenheit von Rede-Überschneidungen hebt das Niveau der Koordination, der Zusammenarbeit und der Höflichkeit, auf denen abgestimmte Gespräche aufgebaut sind.

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[16] See Canestrari & Attardo in this issue for the analysis of a model of humorous attuning.

Humor wird als Strategie angesehen, die von Sprechern benützt wird, um die Resonanzebene ihrer Interaktionen zu bereichern. Der Gebrauch eines humoristischen Beispiels in einer Unterhaltung bringt einen Umschwung von einem ernsten zu einem humoristischen Rahmen, sodass die Merkmale, die in einem ernsthaften übereinstimmenden Rahmen auftreten, sich verändern, die Ebene der Übereinstimmung der Interaktion jedoch bestehen bleibt.

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