ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Towards A "Pragma-Dramatic" Approach To Argumentation

1. *Language and space*

Years ago, when I was a boy scout, I got lost with my group in the middle of nowhere. We found a local man and asked him for directions. "Go that way, not this way. Then, turn this way, that way, not that way. Then, that way but never that way or you'll get lost", he said. While he spoke he did not make any gesture with his hands, his head or his eyes that would allow us to tell "that way" from "this way" or from "that way".

If an experienced actor, whether professional or amateur, would have to perform a scene in which his character spoke like the farmer whom I just mentioned, unless indicated, the actor will fill his/her performance with gestures, tying the words with specific points in the space that surround him/her.

We will try to discuss in this paper about the way in which theatre ties the words with the space and the time in which it develops and what pragmatics can say about these bonds.

In his classic book "Drama as literature" Jiri Veltrusky makes an update for the study of drama. For him, saying that drama is dialogical not only refers to the fact that the action of the play is constructed in and by speech turns, but, more deeply, to the bond between this literary form and time and space. For Veltrusky, the dialog develops not only in time but also in space. It takes places always in an extralinguistic situation that shapes the dialog (1987: 17).

So, if we are going to attempt a study of daily interaction as if we were studying a theatre play, we must include in the analysis not only the words said in that certain order, but the entailment between saying and that specific and changing "here / now" (idem).

Without any doubt, the works of Ervin Goffman, mainly "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", are the most famous attempt to distinguish theatre (drama) categories in daily interactions. But according to our opinion, Goffman tried maybe too hastily to transpose many concepts from a very restricted form of theatre. Nevertheless, we will take his definition of an 'encounter as the minimum

unit of analysis, understood as a continuous of space, time and actors communicating. An entrance, an exit or an interruption of the communication marks the end of one encounter and the beginning of another. (Goffman 1956: 27)

There is also another essential divergence between our point of view and Goffman's that we would like to point out. According to Goffman, "the central understanding (of the scene) consists in that the audience does not have the right or the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action that happens in the scene" (Goffman 1956:125). We think that, being part of a scene, the audience (the agents) can never escape away from the dramatic action.

Plus, to study daily argumentative interaction, which develops without any previous written script, we should move from the study of drama, as a fixed literary object, to the way in which the actors and directors train to develop improvised action on stage. The ideas and exercises developed by Keith Johnstone have been widely accepted and used for the training of actors improvising and for the creation of improvisational spectacles.

When an argumentative interaction is considered as a scene, an 'encounter', conformed by a finite number of oral exchanges, many different elements come together, and can influence, in a decisive way, in the good or bad result of the whole interaction.

Many of these elements have to do with the psycho-social characteristics of those who participate in the interaction, with the form in which those characteristics are selected, activated and they are interpreted in the specific course of the exchange. (Calsamiglia & Tusón 1999: 45). "When we are trying to understand discourse in all its complexity, we must to be able to give account of what we say, how we say it and how we move it" (Poyatos 1994, our translation)

We can grasp here the need to tie the effort of a description of the total argumentation phenomenon with the tools from the pragmatics, defined by María Victoria Escandell as "a discipline that really takes fully in consideration the extralinguistic factors that determine the use of the language, all those factors to which a purely grammar study cannot refer". (Escandell 1993:16)

But let's return to another point of disagreement with Goffman. He claims that, when someone appears, the others surrounding him will try to obtain data out of him, or to recall information that they already have about him, in order to define the situation and get to know, previously, how to provoque a desired response from this individual. (Goffman 1956: 225)

Nevertheless, we here think that the problem is not to obtain or recall information

from the individual. If it were so, it would only be an inferential problem and its solution would be described in statistical terms, and would be enough to adjust, in its methodological aspect, the social theory of the dramatic action in Goffman.

If we recall the distinctions by McKoon and Ratcliff (1992) about automatic and strategical inferential processes, we can say that Goffman's proposal was only interested in strategic inferential processes (that is semantic, instrumental, and predictive processes) specially set in the conscious nature. But there is another type of processes, the automatic ones, to which Goffman did not refer. These non-conscious processes, then, show a leak in Goffman's proposal and deserve to be articulated on a theory that deepens in the theatrical practice and takes advantage of the instrumental power of the pragmatic analysis.

2. *The Status as respective value in the argumentative scene*

The term "status", it is currently used in a wide range of disciplines: sociology, engineering and even laws. However, its use in theatre context is relatively new. We owe it mostly to the work of Keith Johnstone, whose book "Impro: the improvisation and the theatre" was first published in 1969.

In his book, Johnstone, without an explicit speculative eagerness, attracts our attention on "see-saw principle" of status: "I go up and you go down" (1987:37). Status flow through the body and its expression (idem). He sees this phenomenon as a constant: "Each flexion and movement implies a status" (p. 33). Please note that the concept of status in Johnstone does not have direct connection with the sociological use of the term.

In these two sentences we can see that "status transactions" (Johnstone 1987: 72) are equivalent to the concept of "power". So, to emphasize three distinguishing characteristics in Johnstone's observation of status:

1. Resemble an invisible seesaw,

2. Is transmitted through body and its expression,

3. Each expression implies a status.

When Johnstone speaks of "status", he speaks of "power", and he does so without any – at least- conscious debt to the Western philosophical tradition. It is not his interest. He only tries to explain something that, in his experience as acting director, appears once and again.

We will understand status, then, as the name of the relative position of, at least, two subjects in a certain time; that is to say, the status of anyone of the subjects involved in interaction necessarily refers the status of their interlocutor. By

extension, we can also talk about status as the origin or cause of that relative position.

Following Echeverría (1989: 383-386) we can say that an important characteristic of the Western metaphysical tradition in the treatment of power is its reification. For centuries, the western philosophy understood power as a substance, like "something" that is there, independently from the observer. It seemed to be a mysterious being, of great elusive capacity. Sometime seems that we are grasping to it, soon to discover that we have lost it.

A little of this mystery seems to infuse Johnstone's description of the status as "an invisible see-saw". In example, Johnstone says that when actors weren't acting: […] Space flowed around [them] like a fluid. […] The bodies of the actors continually readjusted. As one changed position so all the others altered their positions. Something seemed to flow between them. […] It's only when the actor's movements are related to the space he's in, and to the other actors, that the audience feel 'at one' with the play. The very best actors pump space out and suck it in […] (Johnstone 1987: 57)

Thus, almost like a hydraulic model, the status is transferred from one individual to another one depending on the actions that they carry out and the value that we grant him as observers.

We are attempting here a philosophical approach, which avoids the reification of the phenomenon; we can thus say that power is a linguistic phenomenon. It results from the subjects' capacity of language. This is what Johnstone describes when saying that any expression implies a status.

Status appears, therefore, as a distinction that we make in language. This distinction does not take place as the expression of an answer from our biological structure to what happens in our milieu. It is a product of the power of language to generate experiences.

When we speak of power, of status, we are not describing. When we describe, the distinctions we make belongs to what we observe. However, when we judge, we make an adscription. It is the observer itself who confers to the observed something that appears only in and by the process of observing.

Judgements do not speak only about the organizations and phenomenon they talk about, but about the relation that we establish with them. Consequently, judgements work as synthesizers of the form in which we are in the world, or what Heidegger (1993: 53-59) calls the *Dasein.*

In one word, power is a linguistic distinction that does not talk about a substance, whose existence we assume independent from us. On the contrary, power always lives as a judgement we make.

Power constitutes a phenomenon resulting from a judgement stated by an observer over the greater capacity a certain organization has to generate action. When saying greater, we are recognizing that we compare the capacity to generate action between equivalent organizations. When we say action capacity, we do not talk about an undertaken action. The judgment is not about the action itself but about the dominion of the possible.

The lack of continuity of the judgements and the changing character of the here/now in which they take place, lead us to suppose that, being the power a relative position, two agents cannot have the same status at the same time. The distribution of the power is always unequal. Thus, opposing to Watzlawyck's idea about symmetric and complementary communication (1981: 68-70), we are developing a model in which every status transaction includes a "move" from an agent, and a reaction from the interlocutor, that resets the whole interaction. The difference in the status distribution, and the attempt of the agents to repair it, keep the system going.

This lack of continuity of actions that brings a scene into life has been beautifully explained by the screenwriting coach Robert McKee, who replaces the expression "turn" by 'beat': "A beat is an exchange of behaviour in action/reaction. Beat by Beat these changing behaviors shape the turning of a scene" (1997: 37)

Thus, we can say that these "moves" that readjust the relation of power, modifying the scene, in spite of being unceasing are discontinuous, can be understood as Status Moves within a transaction that we call scene.

What is relevant here -and Johnstone didn't remark- it is that each subject can effect him/herself or the other subject, affecting the dynamic balance. Then, in each speech turn, we can make one of four movements:

1.a "St" opposed to "Sq" increases its status: I am so depressed.
1.b "St" opposed to "Sq" diminishes its status: Though I'm not that depressed.

2.a "St" increases the "Sq" status: You are a very kind
2.b "St" diminishes the "Sq" status: got your degree recently?

Please observe that in the statements 1.a and 1.b the movements are directed to

oneself and in the cases 2.a and 2.b are oriented to the Sq. In the cases 1.a and 2.a the movements are aimed to increase the status and in the cases 1.b and 2.b are aimed to diminish the status.

We can observe, also, different argumentative movements in the conversational interaction (that can be defined in terms of speech acts according to the standard pragmatic theory) that imply as well redistributions in the status of the subjects. Depending on our position respect to a point of view, one will say that we are:
– Accepting (1.b)
– Introducing (1.a)
– Rejecting (1.a)

If we ad argumentative elaboration to our support or rejection (Hofer & Pikowsky 1993: 146), we will say that we are:
– Refuting (1.a)
– Supporting (1.b)
– Closing (1.a)

Upon this point, we should recall that, as Johnstone says, we have been told not to see the status seesaw. The status only becomes visible when the actors are in conflict. At the beginning, recognizing that all movement implies a status that readjusts our power relationship -by changing or reinforcing it- can lead to a kind of paranoiac scenario in which all the movements are seen as threats. This is nothing more than a counterattack from the idea of the power as a precious object that everybody wants to steel.
What should happen, on the contrary, is that to guarantee the possibility of rationality and argumentation, the relation must be able to readjust itself fluently. This is, precisely, the golden rule of improvisation: "you shouldn't block your partner"

3. *Status, power in space.*
If we follow Johnstone's idea that status is basically territorial. (1987: 57) That is to say, frequently, power relationships are readjusted in space; we can recall what we said before. Including the Status Moves in the description of a scene may allow us to restore the bonds between speech acts apparently disconnected.
Thus, for example, a disqualification, that could be understood as a mere transgression of one of the commandments for argumentation, may be seen here as an attempt to readjust the power relationship that responds to a nonverbal

Status Move (i.e., the difference of height of two colleague's podium at ISSA conference) that allow reasoning rather than obstruct it.

Describing the judgements on power of the participants in a daily argumentative interaction, that is to say, to include, for example, the Status Moves in a mediation process is a first attempt to formalize the dramatic components of the argumentation.

Anyway, we still have a long way to go before being able to put together the concepts of pragmatics and the descriptive tools that theatre can give us. Nevertheless, we have observed, working in negotiation workshops, that the possibility of describing our own status movements during a conflict, facilitates the understanding of an interpersonal conflict.

In a broader sense, besides to request your collaboration for continue on developing a "pragma-dramatic" approach for argumentation, we want to invite you to look at the power relationships surpassing the two temptations of the power as an object: It is not a jewel that we must protect, nor a poison that we must extirpate. The power can become a dance, a game, and a seesaw.

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