A Pragmatic Approach to Corporate Crisis Discourse

Ph. D. Thesis

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Key words: linguistics, pragmatics, enterprises, discourse, crisis situations, business, Grice, Relevance Theory, speech acts, politeness strategies

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to present some of the main theories of the 20th century in pragmatics and their applicability in the field of corporate crisis discourse.

The present paper deals with the study of corporate crisis discourse. The theoretical part is represented by the theories of pragmatics (Grice's theories with the Cooperative Principle, The Relevance Theory, epistemic vigilance, speech acts and politeness strategies) which are applied to three cases of declarations of multinational companies undergoing crisis situations (made by the company CEOs in front of the US Congress in testimonies). These companies are Volkswagen (deceiving emissions tests devices), General Motors (faulty ignition switches) and Takata (airbags rupturing). The paper has as its main purpose the identification of the way in which company representatives espress themselves in order to regain the public opinion's trust in their business activities and products.

There is a difference between what people say and what they actually mean. The difference between what the speaker transmits and what the audience interprets as meaning can arise and has a variety of reasons. Grice believed in the Cooperative Principle (made up of several maxims and sub-maxims). For him, communication is based on cooperation and following certain pre-established rules which ensure good and efficient communication.

Neo-Griceans take over his ideas and reinterpret them by reformulating or developing some aspects while the Relevance Theory believes in reaching the right kind of interpretation by finishing the interpretative process when having reached the right degree of relevance. Central to the Relevance Theory is also the notions of epistemic vigilance and metarepresentations.

The main focus of the paper is the analysis of corporate crisis communication. In order to do this one needs to know the economic and social context that lead to the crisis situation and the type of discourse adopted. These aspects that build up the context determine the linguistic element. All corporate discourse is the result of a communicational need determined by economic and social realities.

When analyzing the testimonies of three multinational managers, the paper tries to identify the differences between 'what is said' and 'what is meant' and the way in which they understand protecting their own interests and confidentiality prescriptions while also appeasing the feelings of the public opinion and regaining 'face'. So, the paper is an analysis of how, why, where, and when the Cooperative Principle is being observed in the presentation of the three testimonies mentioned before. These testimonies were made in front of the US Congress as a result of a crisis situation.

The paper is divided into two main parts: the theoretical background to the analysis and the practical one – the analysis of the three testimonies in front of the US Congress with their particularities and differences. The first part goes from Aristotle's rhetoric to the latest theories in pragmatics. The second part is represented by an interpretation of the three testimonies while trying to apply the theoretical data.

The first chapter is the introduction underlining the importance of the analysis and the topics that will be referred to followed by the second chapter which is a presentation of the importance of corporate discourse and its impact on doing business. Corporate discourse is the result of the companies' necessity to define who they are and present themselves on the market. Through actions but also through language businesses show their quality, efficiency, and high turnovers. They rely on language also for creating a feeling of trust, reliability and comfort. Corporate discourse becomes an investment worth making. The conclusion of the chapter is that expressing company identity through language is a natural result of social and economic development. Also, another conclusion is that corporate discourse is subject to different internal and external factors which contribute to its form.

The next chapter deals with Aristotle's rhetoric (350 B.C.). Aristotle identifies three modes of persuasion which are used by speakers in order to convince an audience and win it over. The first one is ethos and it means that the speaker presents himself as somebody reliable, trustworthy, and experienced and who can be considered because of this as somebody who speaks the truth. Pathos is the second mode of persuasion through which the speaker tries to create different feelings in the interlocutor in order to convince. Aristotle also describes a wide array of positive and negative feelings that the audience can experience. The

third mode is called logos and it refers to giving the audience factual, scientific and technical information as a mode of persuasion.

Chapter four is a presentation of Grice's theories. Grice's maxims have brought an innovative and completely different perspective on language and communication starting from the idea that communication should be based on a cooperation between the interlocutors. The speaker should follow some rules (which Grice organizes into maxims and sub-maxims in order to convey the right meaning in the right way to the audience. The chapter is formed of several sub-chapters and gives an account of meaning and the Gricean maxims and the way in which they work while also underlining that Grice's system is not flawless. The Cooperative Principle can work only if the speaker follows these maxims with their sub-maxims.

The theory of conversational implicatures and cooperation shows how language can be used to maximize efficiency in communication. True and relevant communication is governed by one major principle divided into maxims and sub-maxims. These maxims refer to: Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner.

Chapter five is an incursion into the neo-Gricean theory with some of its ideas. Neo-Griceans are concerned mainly with ambiguity in language and how it can be overcome. Some of the representatives are: Bach, Recanati, Huang, Levinson, and Horn. For them, Grice's theory is the starting point but it does not fulfill entirely the problems raised by communication. Also, part of the Neo-Gricean theory is the impliciture which denotes the pragmatically enriched concept that the speaker wants to convey. Implicitures work by saying something but not meaning that.

These would be some of the examples of neo-Gricean theories which have brought a more rigorous perspective on Grice's theory of communication. They have also constructed a more organized system important in building a more reliable theory. Neo-Griceans have brought new ideas regarding meaning, explicatures, and implicatures.

Chapter six continues with the Relevance Theory and the opinions of its representatives. They move farther away from the Gricean theories and consider that the speaker reconstructs the meaning of what was uttered. In the Relevance Theory truthfulness is not the main issue, although nobody would like to be lied at. Truthfulness is related to relevance. Many sentences we utter have a degree of untruthfulness because people express themselves loosely. Comprehension is seen as a complex process which depends on how efficient the inference of getting from 'what is said' to 'what is meant'. Relevance is thus seen as a property of inputs, both external and internal which are used in cognitive processes

and take part in the processing of meaning. Inputs are very numerous and it is impossible for us to analyze all of them. So, what we do is maximize the right kinds of input and use only those which guarantee the best results.

In the Relevance Theory, implicatures and explicatures are constructed in parallel. To understand an explicature an inference is required. To understand an implicature one needs to identify the implicated elements and arrive to an explicit utterance.

Another part of the paper deals with epistemic vigilance as our competence of analyzing and interpreting the messages we receive in the right way while chapter eight continues with an introduction into the speech acts theory with its main representatives.

The ninth chapter refers to the theory of politeness and politeness strategies, and the Tact Maxim of not causing offence followed by chapter ten which is the practical part of the paper.

Chapter ten interprets according to the theories presented in the first part the testimonies delivered by Volkswagen, General Motors and Takata managers in front of the US Congress together with a comparison between the three.

What we can notice from the paper is that companies apply different strategies to communicate the contents based on different necessities and context and also on confidentiality issues. The conclusion of the paper is that each of the speakers adopts different ways of communicating the contents according to some strategies. The text interpretations are an application of the theories described in the theoretical part.