A METHOD FOR THE EVALUATION OF RECIPIENT RESPONSE TO METAPHORICAL PROPOSITIONS

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The aim of this paper is 1. to outline in short the objectives pursued within the frame of our research in general; 2. to outline the method devised to provide a relatively satisfactory answer to our questions; and 3. to highlight a number of problems raised by our approach, i.e. to draw attention to a number of possible pitfalls in the use of the method.

Our general preoccupation is with theographic (i.e. descriptive theological) statements in popular religious prose. In an earlier paper (van Hoppen 1979a, 1979b) we have attempted to describe the mode of meaning obtaining in these propositions in terms of metaphor logic. This model of description was found to be more adequate than, say, the more traditional logics of literalism, fundamentalism, revelation, and analogy.

The procedure outlined here was conceived as the third prong of a project endeavouring to elucidate a number of communication problems that had been observed in the realm of popular theology. Previous phases involved lexical scrutiny of a number of texts, and a content analysis of the correspondence between the author of the text and his audience (van Hoppen 1976). From these enquiries it became clear that the obstacle to effective exchange between the professional theologians and their lay public at large was less a problem of word meaning than one of propositional sense and logic (van Hoppen 1978). The asymmetry in status between author and reader, it was observed, frequently led to a situation in which the sense of the propositions was determined almost exclusively from the specialist's point of view, with an apparent disregard for the layman's more limited insight into the precise doctrinal implications of the expressions. A perusal of the author's complaints on the one hand, and of the readers' reactions on the other, indicated that the connotations associated with the propositions by the readers were not invariably consistent with the shades of meaning intended or used by the writer. It would be an error, therefore, to consider "meaning" as a solid and indivisible entity, as an inherent property of expressions; one must maintain a dis-
tinction between the content of a proposition as a type, and its interpretation, i.e. the various ways in which the expression can be understood and responded to in various potential communication contexts, and study the value of the terms in their contexts to both the "sender" and the "receiver".

In the present case example, the aim pursued is to indicate the nature and the intensity of the recipients' response to spatial terms framed within theographic messages; in other words, to measure a number of propositions' effectiveness in conveying theographic sense from the author towards the addressees.

This procedure assumes a communication model like, say, SHANNON and WEAVER's (1949:7). Our preoccupation would, in Weaver's terms, be with the S-level of communication: "how precisely do the transmitted symbols carry the desired meaning?" The objective is not to measure the quantity of factual information conveyed by the utterances, since as a consequence of the subject matter (i.e. a putative mode of supernatural reality) and of the mode of logic prevailing within the particular register, the sense of the utterances relies on intuition rather than on extension. Nor is it our goal to examine the recipient's process of comprehension, in which we might have recourse to some natural language understanding system. The method relevant to our purpose should enable us to chart the public's ability to recognize the potential metaphorical, incasural, theographic, value of the focus within its context and to interpret it "correctly", that is, optimally with regard to the meaning originally intended.

The rules of transference (LARKIN 1969:89), which explain how metaphorical sense can be made out of apparently contradictory or seemingly divergent propositions, and approaches which consider metaphorical propositions as ambiguous because of the polysemy of the focus (Yardley 1971:117-8) bring us a step closer to our aim inasmuch as they seek to determine the features which constitute the (typical or arbitrary) basis for (actual or potential) transferred use, but do not allow one to assess the constitutive value of an image unless it be based on relatively predictable and/or typical features (ARGOS/CAHIER 1976: 140-3). The demand at this stage, then, is for a method that enables us to deal with constitutive aspects of meaning and that offers the possibility to measure this meaning in objective, quantifiable terms. Following the approach advocated, but not worked out, by JEFFERSON (1972:71) we sought to apply to our specific objectives a technique inspired by ODOGOC's semantic differential (1971:20-26, 273-5). The choice proved to be a fruitful one, inasmuch as the

approach offers a "combination of controlled association and scaling procedures (...) designed to measure the meanings (states of language users) of signs (units of messages)". In Ogodoc's technique, the meaning associated with a sign is judged against a series of scales representing a continuum between polar pairs of adjectives which verbally determine various dimensions of experience. Early research on the development of the method drew attention to the kinship between synesthetic associations of various forms of experience on the one hand, and the process of metaphorical assimilation on the other, when the associations were given a linguistic form. This observation led to the proposal to use the semantic differential as an index of certain aspects, especially connotative aspects, of linguistic meaning.

Relying ourselves on these experimental and theoretical premises, we deemed it possible to adopt this method to our purposes in order to measure and quantify the connotative meanings associated with spatial focus in theographic frames against a series of scales between "contrary" adjectives, substantivates, and phrases representing the various theological categories involved, and thus to assess the "theographic card-value" of particular terms and categories without having to go through the laborious intermediate stage of defining the transferred or transferrable components. Before this adaptation could be achieved, however, three problems remained to be solved:

1. It was, obviously, impossible to require the future respondents to rate the theographic value associated with every single proposition in the Corpus of texts, or even with one occurrence of every type. For this reason, a selection was aimed at among the various theographic propositions so as to confront the respondents with a manageable sample of expressions reflecting the atmosphere and the issues of the kind of popular theology under study, as well as the categories typical of the age's theography - thus to give us as safe and representative a basis as possible for tentative generalizations at a later stage. As a matter of choice, and for various reasons developed in another paper (Van Eijndhoven 1974), it was decided to focus on theographic expressions based on the crucial category of spatial imagery, i.e. of relation, localisation, orientation, polarity, etc.

2. Our option to assess the respondents' reactions to whole expressions rather than to individual word symbols raised problems of its own, since one might justifiably argue that the subjects' attention could be diverted from the spatial focus to another phase of the proposition. However, on the basis of our earlier
observation that the main source of misunderstanding resided in the sense of theophoric statements rather than in the meaning of individual terms, it was deemed that the results obtained by response to spatial foils embedded within their original theophoric contexts would yield a more adequate picture of the public's recognition of their theophoric value than the elicitation of connotations associated with single lexical items. Care was taken, however, to present the spatial foils within frames as coherent as possible (at least according to the authors of the statements) in order to obtain responses to one theophoric category at a time.

3. We disposed of an absolute standard of orthodoxy with reference to which the public's reactions could be differentiated and charted. For this reason, the respondents were asked first to delineate their personal notion of "God" by associating the term with the given pairs of polarities, and only afterwards to chart their reactions to the various theophoric propositions. In this manner, the degree of accuracy or distortion resulting from particular modes of theophory could be measured for each individual respondent in terms of the deviation with regard to his own conception of the divine.

These considerations eventually led us to the elaboration of a series of semantic association grids, the vary of which was constituted by characteristic spatial-theophoric propositions, the first ten continua between theoretical opposites, divided into seven columns to facilitate the quantification of the intensity of the various responses, and the calculation of the deviations observed. For practical purposes, the equi-conceptual poles were grouped on one side of the grid. (A sample grid is reproduced below)

Alongside the completion of one of these grids for every statement submitted to them, the respondents were given the opportunity to formulate freely their own paraphrase of the propositions, or to comment on the responses given in the grid. Appropriate spaces for this purpose were provided in the questionnaires. The combination of forced-choice scales and open-ended questions was deemed to offer several advantages: it allowed us to elicit responses from subjects not accustomed to think or speak of God in the categories defined by the pairs of opposites, and it partly resolved the ambiguity of responses in the central "zero" column: subjects failing to chart their degree of association with either of the opposites or failing to indicate any response at all were thus offered a chance to comment on their reasons for doing so.

Having thus fixed our objectives, decided upon a method, and elaborated a questionnaire, we must now briefly comment upon our options with regard to the practical organisation of the enquiry.

The questionnaire was administered to a sample of native English speakers from a variety of social, religious, and educational backgrounds. A systematic attempt was made at representativeness or stratification of the sample according to the canons of sociological research. This rather arbitrary choice of respondents was primarily conditioned by constraints imposed by the time and facilities available, although a number of other arguments may be invoked as well:

1. Our aim was not to infer from the sample any general conclusions about the public or the readers of popular theology as a whole, but to study various responses to a particular mode of language use.

2. Since the propositions used were borrowed from a Corpus of "popular" literature, all adult native speakers of English could, in principle, be considered as potential addressers, and therefore qualify as informants. We are conscious, however, that the compromise constitutes the usual composition of the sample seriously limits the possibility of generalising about any correlations between the variables in the Corpus of Informants (age, education, religious affiliation,...) and possible differences that might be observed in their responses. As in the case of a Corpus, the validity of the conclusions is limited to the sample used; yet, although no claims at exhaustiveness or representativeness of the observed responses can be made, the information yielded by a body of informants, albeit limited, provides more objective and reliable indications than can be gained from introspective methods of investigation.

3. Although precedents do not per se provide a justification, it may be pointed out that whereas sociolinguistic enquiries which seek to correlate linguistic data with specific social variables give evidence of at least some degree of rigour in the construction of their samples, many linguistically oriented studies, say in acceptability, use, and attitude, make little or no attempt to draw on a systematically composed body of informants (Cf. for example the majority of contributions to GREENBAUM (ed.) 1977.)

It is interesting to note that a fair number of respondents spontaneously appended notes and comments to the questionnaires, either to describe the diffi-
First, an analysis was made of the responses to the term "God". The average of the responses between 1 and 7 on each scale was calculated up to the first decimal, and represented by a line on the grid. Next, an inter-judges comparison between the responses obtained for the term "God" and for each of the statements was carried out. The average responses to the statements were represented graphically by dots on the scales, in such a manner that the degree of deviation could be visualized by means of the distance and the direction of the gap between the line and the dot.

Statement 19: "There is no being out there at all. The skies are empty."

Average response to: "God" Stat. 19 Difference

| Thing:Person | 5.5 | 3.6 | -1.9 |
| Body:Spirit | 6.0 | 4.5 | -1.5 |
| Concern:Absence | 2.8 | 4.9 | +2.1 |
| Presence:Absence | 2.4 | 5.4 | +3.0 |
| Dynamic:Static | 3.0 | 5.0 | +2.0 |
| Inside/Outside | 2.6 | 4.8 | +2.2 |
| Same/Different | 5.8 | 4.5 | -1.3 |
| Relevant/Unrelevant | 2.0 | 4.9 | +2.9 |
| Real/Unreal | 2.4 | 5.5 | +2.9 |
| Attractive:Managing | 3.1 | 4.1 | +1.0 |

The analysis of these data shows that the responses in the grids concord with the informal results obtained in the correspondences and in the open pararaphrases. We may infer, therefore, that despite the limitations and reserved which we have deemed proper to impose on our observations, valuable indications and insights into the readers' attitudes may be gained. Future experience must prove the degree of reliability of the method, and notably whether the application of...
Caspian techniques to whole propositions elicit the same degree of consensus from the informants as the semantic association with single terms. In the converse case, a new experiment should attempt to operate with pairs or groups of sentences featuring minimal differences. It, however, the method proves as reliable and practically workable as the present state of our study allows us to hope, its potential applications in the whole realm of verbal communication are manifold.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ENTRING LINGUISTIC ACTION THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

Jef Verschueren

(The form in which this paper was presented can by no means be regarded as final. It was merely a manifesto. Therefore I confine myself to publishing an abstract. A thoroughly revised version of the complete text will appear sooner or later as the introductory chapter to a longer work in preparation to be called "What people say they do with words").

ABSTRACT

In order to gain insight into any form of social behavior a researcher can either operate with a preconceived framework of abstract and general concepts (the Front Door Method) or he can attempt to penetrate into the conceptual space that the participants in the action associate with it (the Back Door Method). In practice, neither of these methods exists in its pure form. Thus, the framework of abstract and general concepts with which the object of investigation can be approached is (consciously or unconsciously) based on the Front Door researcher's previous observations of concrete and particular phenomena and, hence, absolute universality can never be reached. On the other hand, the Back Door researcher will probably never succeed completely in giving up his habits of generalization; more importantly, an actor's conceptualization of his own actions can only be studied indirectly, for instance by scrutinizing the ways in which he talks about his actions or, on a higher level of generality, the ways in which his language allows him to talk about them. No doubt, some universals of behavior exist; therefore the Front Door Method is necessary. But since abstract and general concepts can never capture the full meaning of social phenomena which are themselves concrete and particular, and since there is a fundamental unity between the actor's concepts and the practices they serve to conceptualize, also the Back Door Method should be applied. A combination of the two methods may yield an optimal understanding of social behavior. Social studies have mainly used the Front Door Method, though some plans for the alternative have been made (e.g. P. Winch, 1958, "The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy", London : Routledge)