ON THE PRAGMEME

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When people have asked me what kind of speech this would be, I have answered, "A scholar's speech." (When I said that to my friend Bobby Patton, he rejoined, "Who's going to write it?")

Actually, when I say "a scholar's speech," what I mean is that I intend it to stimulate research and theory in a particular direction. I do not mean to say that it is *not* a speech on the state of the discipline and the profession, for in a way I mean it to be a comment on the state of the discipline and the profession. Nor do I mean to say that it is *not* a political speech, for I perceive that the directions of our research and theory have strong political implications.

Let me begin by amplifying those two qualifications.

The state of the *profession* (that is, the values attached to the activities of teaching and doing research in communication) clearly is excellent. We do not have to look far to find evidence of the health of the profession. Membership in this organization, except for a surge temporarily resulting from some artificial membership inducements more than a decade ago, is at an all-time high. Communication courses and curricula are in great demand, even overwhelming demand at some institutions. (These enrollment pressures may occasionally make us feel that we are *suffering* from our good health.) Some of us enjoy wonderful new facilities, dedicated exclusively to our teaching, research, and artistic activities. A few of us, possibly for the first time since the Boylston Chair at Harvard, can now boast endowed professorships in our departments, endowed for the purpose of stimulating research and theory. The scholarly endeavor has received new reinforcement by the introduction of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in this organization and by strong encouragement from commercial publishers and from a number of university presses, who are finding out that communication sells and that communication scholars are its best articulators. I probably need not mention for this audience the dramatic renaissance of rhetoric, nor its greatly expanded manifestations. Expressions of anguish from "departments in distress" have sharply diminished during the past two years, and most that were in distress two years ago have undertaken their own rescue. A good scientist should have a control condition, and I have none—but I perceive a profession more healthy than it has been in my memory and more healthy than are its reference groups. And this health exists in spite of kicklocks against us at certain backward and misguided institutions.

The state of the *discipline* (that is, the success of our research and theory on a focused object of study), while better than at any previous time in our history, leaves something to be desired. We have not always been research-

ers and theorists. Our origins were in very practical affairs, as is evinced by the various names we have adopted for ourselves. We started as the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. From a very early time, we have been defined by what we do *practically*. Thus, many of us began institutionally in departments of speech and theatre, probably because we (and others who could influence our fate) were using a category system in which "oral communication skills" somehow was prominent and somehow defined us. Since about 1930, mediated, as well as unmediated, practical communication skills have found their way into our rubric, and in practical respects mass communication performance and production have become a crucially important part of the profession. We teach, and we always have taught, communication as a cluster of performance, production, and interpretation skills, and others value and have valued that teaching.

Yet, even from our formal beginnings almost exactly 70 years ago, on November 28, 1914 (my birthday minus 21 years), there were those among us who perceived that our teaching was in the service of our research and theory, and vice versa—that our teaching must be based on theory and that our theory must be grounded in practice. Foremost among these were our three W's: Winans, Wichelns, and Woolbert. Our organization now honors their vision with some of its most precious awards.

And so to politics. Winans, Wichelns, and Woolbert had vision, but they were not visionaries. They advocated emphasis on research and theory because they rightly perceived that practical aspirations alone were insufficient to attain for communication a secure place even in the university of the teens and twenties. "Practical" was coming to have a synonym: "applied." And what is to be applied practically? Something called "theory." Winans, Wichelns, and Woolbert knew (as we should know) that, unless the theory to be applied were to come from us rather than from others, we would be in constant peril of being subsumed by those others, even in our practical aspects. And the peril has not disappeared today, seventy years later.

I said earlier that the state of our discipline, while more healthy than ever previously, leaves something to be desired. I recognize that to some extent our discipline by its nature is interdependent with others. Communication (even "empty rhetoric") requires perception, and perception per se is in the domain of psychology. Communication and perception are greatly influenced by social structures, and social structures per se are in the domain of sociology and to a degree in the domain of political science. Communication, perception, and social structures require a "reality," and reality per se is in the domain of the natural sciences and of philosophy.

But we have our own unique domain. That domain is, in a semiotician's view of the universe, "pragmatics": the study of the mutual influence between and among people and their signs and symbols. Currently, as social sci-

entists, as humanists, and as artists we are doing pretty well in that domain. Our scholarly outlets teem with stimulating research, and our younger scholars are both better informed and more incisive than our older ones. Our work is increasingly recognized by some of the other disciplines that, in substantial ways, are interdependent with us, a phenomenon I first noted when William McGuire of Yale displayed our work prominently in his chapter of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (2nd edition, 1969). Works are more and more often appearing in which communication scholars and scholars from other disciplines rest comfortably between the same book and journal covers.

The question is not, "Are we doing well," but is, rather, "Could we do better?" Our work is being recognized, but not everywhere that it ought to be recognized. More important, in my view, we have not yet done the most compelling work to be recognized in the most compelling ways. We have not yet devised powerful theories of pragmatics.

What I am about to say may sound as though it is directed to a very narrow audience: scholars (especially younger scholars) interested in building theories of pragmatics. In a sense, it is directed in that narrow way. Nevertheless, I think that either directly or by analogy it may be extended to all who are interested either in devising or in understanding theories of communication. It entails a social scientist's view of the world (and therefore my friend Michael McGee might say that it is scientistic rather than scientific). But it also entails the assumptions that communication scholars generally make about symbolic behavior. I hope that the more general audience, therefore, includes nearly everyone here. (I will now pause for a moment to permit others to leave, without rancor on my part.)

In a book being featured by one of the exhibitors at this convention, James J. Bradac and I proposed what we took to be the beginnings of a plan for a powerful theory of pragmatics. We called this plan "pragmemics." To scholars acquainted with linguistics, the word will reverberate. It will bring to mind "phonemics" and "morphemics," branches of linguistics concerned with meaning in the syntactic and semantic domains of semiotics. Bradac and I intend to produce those echoes.

(We have largely conceded syntactics and semantics to linguistics. We should *not* so concede pragmatics.)

Phonemics and morphemics have characteristics that should be very interesting to students of pragmatics. Phonemes and morphemes are not strongly or clearly ordered by their physical features. Physically (to use a social scientist's jargon), phonemes and morphemes sometimes have more variance *within* classes than they have *among* classes. Hence, they are defined perceptually—by their *meanings*—rather than physically—by their characteristics as stimuli.

The point is that phonemics and morphemics work according to systems. And those systems are systems of *meaning*. Linguists (and others, including some who belong or have belonged

to this organization) have gone a long way toward articulating those systems of meaning. We can say that phonemics and morphemics have powerful theories.

Bradac and I hope that communication theorists will take the leap of faith required to arrive at the conviction that pragmatic behavior is systematic in the same sense that syntactic and semantic behavior are systematic. Some developmental psychologists (e.g., John Dore, Jerome Bruner, Elizabeth Bates) now rightly believe that language develops *in the service of communication*, an opinion that may seem obvious to us but that has not always been obvious in the scholarly literature of psychology and linguistics. Surely, then, phonemics and morphemics are subsystems that develop in the service of a suprasystem: pragmemics. In fact, it now seems likely that pragmatic needs generate each stage of linguistic development, so that pragmatic development probably precedes and produces linguistic development.

Once communication scholars are convinced that pragmatic behavior is systematic, they cannot help but arrive at the simultaneous conclusion that the system can be articulated, that powerful theories of pragmatics are possible. Such theories must account for how the interactions among characteristics of individuals (including motivational states), characteristics of social situations, and characteristics of linguistic and extralinguistic contexts help to account for the force of particular utterances and of classes of utterances. In other words, such a theory must answer such questions as: How is it that different utterances by different people in different social and linguistic situations have the same communicative force? How is it that the same utterance by different people in different social and linguistic situations have different communicative force? What sort of competence do human beings acquire so that they can use this system, both in production and in interpretation, more or less effectively?

An example might be useful to some of you. If I say to the president of my university, in the presence of a number of my peers, "Jim, pass the beer," my utterance probably would be perceived as having the force of a rude request, and I probably would be perceived as relatively incompetent pragmatically. The power difference (that is, the degree to which each of us is able to facilitate and/or inhibit the other's progress toward his goals) is so great that the utterance cannot be considered polite. On the other hand, if my president, myself, and the others who are present have just completed a very friendly collaboration on an engrossing project, and if we are celebrating our success on that project, then "Jim, pass the beer" might very well count as an appropriately polite request. Our compatibility—the degree to which I perceive that my president's goals and my own are identical—might be sufficient to compensate for our power difference, so that my request, in the contrast "polite/rude," would be analyzed as polite. I could complicate the example further, of course, and so could you, by piling on levels of metacommunication, such as winks and smiles, so that,

like Erving Goffman, we might add frames and keys to the analysis. But the point is that relative power and compatibility, which some people call roughly status and solidarity, are probably important features for a theory of pragmatics. And a variable that might be called transparency/opacity (cf. "Colleagues, my glass seems to be empty") may be an important variable related to the force of an utterance in the same theory of pragmatics.

Similarly, personality and motivational variables might be involved in determining the force of my request. If I urgently need the beer—if my coat is on fire because of careless smoking and the beer is the only available douser—my utterance might be considered sufficiently polite and observers might not question my pragmatic competence. Norman Elliott, Roger Desmond, and I tried to explicate this and a few other pragmatic issues in a paper we did some years ago.

Pragmatics does work according to a system.

I see in nearly every issue of our journals and in nearly every book that emerges from our presses that communication scholars, especially younger scholars, are moving toward the articulation of this system, toward this leap to a new and powerful theory. I believe that the person or group who devises this theory (assuming that he, she, or it chooses the proper outlet and exhibits high rhetorical skill) will be forever honored by the discipline, will become a cynosure and possibly an eponym. The times are auspicious and the fruit is nearly ripe on the vine. Let the paradigm emerge!

I make this appeal with a certain urgency. Communication scholars and scholars from other disciplines stand on virtually identical terrain. I perceive that communication scholars have a slight advantage in that respect. We are more accustomed to reading what they write than they are accustomed to reading what we write. Hence, our best may literally know more than the best among the others know. We perceive our reliance on other disciplines more than most other disciplines perceive their reliance on us. (For that reason, they have a problem—but so do we.)

On the other hand, communication scholars are also at a disadvantage, and I cannot say how serious the disadvantage is. We are unaccustomed to devising theories that will compel the attention of other disciplines, and we may perceive that such a theory is an unrealistic aspiration, is beyond our reach. To the extent that such an attitude exists among us, of course, it constitutes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a person is to do a thing, that person must first be convinced that it can be done, and must second be convinced that he or she is the one who can do it. I have not noticed that communication scholars, especially younger scholars, are especially modest (though a certain apparent modesty is pragmatically useful to a theorist). Nevertheless, I have some anxiety about the level of their aspirations, about the reference groups with which they compare their own accomplishments.

If our scholars do not seize this opportunity, others will. I have not mentioned the names

of our own who are close to the goal I envision, because I feared overlooking some who should be recognized. I have no such reticence about scholars from other disciplines.

I have already noted some names from developmental cognitive psychology: Jerome Bruner, John Dore, and Elizabeth Bates are articulating pragmemics from a developmental point of view.

Many eminent social psychologists are still debating propositions that communication theorists take as given—e.g., that situations elicit meanings, including evaluative meanings, and that individuals react more or less consistently to their meanings for particular classes of situations. (We call this consistency "personality," or, if discursive consistency, "style.") But some, such as Seymour Epstein with his well-reasoned work on personality and situation are on the right track, as are Daryl Bem and David Funder, with their work on "the personality of situations."

Some scholars are difficult to classify as to discipline (linguists? philosophers? sociolinguists?), but they are prominent in the race toward a solution: H. P. Grice, John Searle, Kent Bach, Robert Harnish, Michael Hancher. Possibly most impressive among these is Stephen Levinson, with his synthesis of various approaches to the problem. None of these will be deterred by unrealistically low aspirations. (I might also note in passing that none of these cites the work of scholars whose identification is principally with communication.)

Many of you may have perceived in these remarks what you consider to be a defective value system. From one point of view, I sympathize with your perception. You see me placing "false and dangerous disciplinary boundaries" on "knowledge." The important quest is for theory, whatever its source, and I am idealistic enough to recognize that the value of theory transcends the value of identification with theory.

But I also appear here today to speak of and for the discipline. Today, I must be political. And from the point of view of the discipline and its future, identification with theory *does* matter. I will not be so trite as to place us at a crossroads. But I might suggest that appropriate aspirations and actions now may smooth and strengthen the road ahead for those who are to follow us.

This communicative act now has almost ended. I hope that those of you to whom it is most directly relevant have taken it as I intended it: In the spirit of Winans, Wichelns, and Woolbert, a friendly stick and a fond carrot as a prod and an inducement to give the discipline the best you have to give. I hope that others of you will see, by analogy and by extension, that the success of your work and the success of your discipline are interactive, that part of your job is to theorize and to encourage theorizing about symbolic behavior. And I hope that all of us will be at least mildly invigorated (for I aspire only to invigoration, not to inspiration) as we get on with that work.

Thank you for your kind attention, on this occasion, from time to time in the past and, I hope, from time to time in the future.