Cognitive space dimensions in pragma-semantic analysis of defamatory communication

Dimensiones del espacio cognitivo en el análisis pragma-semántico de la comunicación difamatoria

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ABSTRACT

Based on P. Peverelli's cognitive space theory (2000), I. Schlesinger's description of cognitive space in linguistics (1995) and G. Newby's fundamental concept for information retrieval (1993), which is developed after D. Meadows and Heiner Benking's attempt to map dimensions of various cognitive spaces (1972), and others, this paper presents a pragma-semantic analysis of defamatory communication. Following after G. Bateson (2002) and S. Grof (2002) the authors argue that defamatory communication is better comprehended and interpreted as metacommunication, or "communication about communication" (Bateson, 2002), where correlation of communicative roles of metacommunication actors influences the utterances meanings and their perlocutionary effect. It's an integrative approach to the research of the pragmatic component of a defamatory utterance which influences the stability of the lexeme meaning. It can strengthen the negative connotation of a defamatory lexeme or neutralize it in discourse. Pragma-semantic analysis of defamatory metacommunication is presented here in three cognitive space dimensions such as the Gender, Age and Structure. It demonstrates possible interpretations of male, female and children's discourse on the example of *gossip*. It shows how the type of Observer in metacommunication determines the utterance perlocutionary effect, influences the choice of the verb of defamation and defines the possibility of defamatory metacommunication within some particular discourse in general.

Keywords: pragma-semantic analysis, cognitive space, defamatory communication, metacommunication, cognitive space dimensions.

RESUMEN

Basado en la teoría del espacio cognitivo de P. Peverelli (2000), la descripción del espacio cognitivo en lingüística de I. Schlesinger (1995) y el concepto fundamental de G. Newby para la recuperación de información (1993), que se desarrolla después del intento de mapeo de D. Meadows y Heiner Benking Dimensiones de varios espacios cognitivos (1972), y otros, este artículo presenta un análisis pragma-semántico de la comunicación difamatoria. Después de G. Bateson (2002) y S. Grof (2002), los autores argumentan que la comunicación difamatoria se comprende mejor y se interpreta como metacomunicación, o «comunicación sobre comunicación» (Bateson, 2002), donde la correlación de los roles comunicativos de los actores de metacomunicación influye los significados de los enunciados y su efecto perlocucionario. Es un enfoque integrador para la investigación del componente pragmático de un enunciado difamatorio que influye en la estabilidad del significado del lexema. Puede fortalecer la connotación negativa de un lexema difamatorio o neutralizarlo en el discurso. El análisis pragma-semántico de la metacomunicación difamatoria se presenta aquí en tres dimensiones del espacio cognitivo, como el género, la edad y la estructura. Demuestra posibles interpretaciones del discurso de hombres, mujeres y niños sobre el ejemplo del chisme. Muestra cómo el tipo de observador en metacomunicación determina el efecto perlocucionario de la expresión, influye en la elección del verbo de difamación y define la posibilidad de metacomunicación difamatoria dentro de algún discurso en particular en general.

Palabras clave: análisis pragma-semántico, espacio cognitivo, comunicación difamatoria, metacomunicación, dimensiones del espacio cognitivo.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that defamatory communication poses a serious problem in the society. No wonder that libel (a written defamatory statement) and slander (a spoken or oral defamatory statement) have become subjects to liability in a number of civil lawsuits in recent times.

Nevertheless, people continue slandering, gossiping and casting aspersions on the others. Sometimes they distinctly comprehend that they inflict suffering and cause emotional distress to their victims. Consequently, defamatory communication has become a serious problem both judicially and psychologically.

However, while the lawyers are trying to prove the fact of defamation for lawsuits, the psycholinguists are intending to discover and explain the reasons and perlocutionary effect of defamatory utterances. They're also wondering why one and the same communicative act is assessed differently by the eyewitnesses of communication, who provide judgements sometimes opposite in meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We believe that the cognitive space approach is the better way to interpret this kind of utterances. This term was brought into use by Peter Peverelli. He elaborated on this theory and defined the term "cognitive space" as "social cognitive configuration and multiple inclusion" (Peverelli, 2000).

In this view it has been proposed that there are two basic elements in a cognitive space which are closely interconnected. They are "the social element, the actors involved, and the cognitive element, their share cognitive matter" (Cognitive space, 2019; Kord et al., 2017). The shared cognitive matter can be called in other words "collective cognitive space", which helps people understand each other while communicating. The shared content can include symbols, shared views, common language use, social norms, common ways-to-do-things, etc. But there is another cognitive space, which is not shared with anybody else. It utterly and completely belongs to the individual. It's his or her life experience, education, worldview, personal identity, etc. It is termed as "individual cognitive space" which acts like a filter of input information in communication act (Meadows, 1972; Schlesinger, 1995; Santana et al., 2017). It means that people, possessing different background (individual cognitive space), comprehend the same situation differently and assess it in their own way.

Another thing to be taken into account is that communication can be complicated by its structure. Communication consisting of "two communications" is in other words "communication about communication" (G. Bateson's definition: Bateson, 2002) or "metacommunication" (Grof, 2002, p. 220).

If to analyze defamation, for instance, the first communication or act (it's termed here as "precedent communication") is the communication when somebody utters something false and offensive to (or about) the other person. The second communication (we term it "current communication") is somebody's judgement about (or assessment of) the precedent communication, when a person ("the Observer") utters about somebody's defamation (Kovalyova et al., 2010; Gurevich, 2009). Thus, when we analyze such utterance as They want to keep going and **defame** these guys (SPOK. "Hillary's "Hard Choices""), it is not a defamation itself, it's a judgement about somebody's precedent communication, witnessed by the Observer and nominated by him / her this way. In its general sense the precedent communication can be termed as "utterance with its propositional content" (Harras & Winkler, 1994), but the term "proposition" is much wider in its sense, denoting any type of information implied by the speaker, not exactly additional communicative act.

As Grof argues, human communication is a very complex process, which simultaneously involves verbal exchange and a variety of kinesic and paralinguistic elements. "These can be seen as metacommunicative signals, or messages about messages, indicating how the verbal communication should be understood and interpreted." (Grof, 2002, p. 220). The full meaning of words is not a literal verbal meaning, it's a critical codetermination based on the analysis of a lot of paralinguistic signals. Communication experts argue that less than a third of the meaning is transferred from the spoken words (O'Rourke, 2008, p. 216), and presumably the major part of this transferred meaning is dependent on extralinguistic factors of communication.

This assertion comes from my investigation of different examples of defamatory discourse where the communicators were distinct from each other by their *gender, age* and *person's awareness*, etc., which can be termed after Meadows "cognitive dimensions" (Meadows et al., 1972).

The interpretation of precedent communication also depends on the type of the Observer, which is going to be explained further. Leaping ahead, when a third person speaks about somebody's defamation, it can be considered as *a statement of the fact*, but when the speaker is a victim of defamation, his claim can be judged as *accusation*, which is a performative utterance.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the following scientific approaches:

- cognitive space theory (P. Peverelli, 2000);
- description of cognitive space in linguistics (I. Schlesinger, 1995)

- the theory of cognitive space dimensions (D. Meadows and H. Benking, 1972);
- fundamental concept for information retrieval (G. Newby, 1993)
- metacommunication theory (Bateson, 2002);
- pragma-semantic analysis (Gurevich, 2010).

An integrative analysis of both constituents of metacommunication (the precedent communication and the current communication) is not the same as the description of "the propositional component" in the speech act verbs approach (Searle 1980; Wierzbicka 1987; Harras & Winkler 1994, etc.). In this respect, the verbs used for nomination of metacommunication are termed as "metacommunicative verbs". The terms "verbs of communication" or "speech act verbs" are not appropriate for the analysis of metacommunication on the above mentioned reason (cf. Harras & Winkler, 1994, p. 441).

The Gender Dimension of Cognitive Space in Defamatory Metacommunication

"Each individual has his/her proper cognitive space, i.e. a perceptive capacity. The dimensions of this cognitive space depend on information, training and finally on a person's awareness. All this depends globally from the cultural setting" (Meadows et al., 1972, p. 19).

The cognitive space dimensions are given in a most generalized sense. Particularly, a person's perceptive capacity can be analyzed within the framework of more exact dimensions. One of them, we've tried to analyze, is gender dimension in defamatory metacommunication of slander, gossip, humiliation, etc. More than 1000 examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) were taken for this analysis.

The research has resulted in some contradictive facts. Namely, the analysis of gossip has revealed that the female discourse is predominantly associated with derisive and vicious utterances[1]. Generally speaking, it presents negative assertion of precedent communication. This negative connotation can be distilled from the meaning of couplets, accompanying a metacommunicative lexeme in order to intensify its meaning. For example: (1) Bad Girls are more likely to accept gossiping, bullying and aggressive behavior in their own lives (N. Jensen. The sisters). Bullying and aggressive behavior used as homogeneous parts of the sentence along with gossiping aggravates perlocutionary effect of negative connotation.

Sometimes the negative assertion is verbalize in the sentence, where the precedent communication is explicated: (2) "She knew some of the others talked behind her back, gossiping about her clothes and her dirty shoes" (N. Jensen. The sisters). The detailing of the propositional component of the utterance can be explained as the Observer's intension to justify his or her assessment of the precedent communication as gossiping. On the other hand, explication can intensify its negative connotation like in the previous example with homogeneous parts of the sentence.

Another widely used method of explication of negative assertion is reproduction of the precedent communication content in indirect speech: (3) I will be interested if, you know, how your babysitter feels if you find her gossiping about you and saying, oh, you know, she just doesn't want to be home with her kid or something of that sort. (Spok. Tell Me More). The reason why the Observer (and simultaneously the Speaker of the current communication) reproduces the content of the precedent communication is presumably the same as in the previously analyzed examples. Nevertheless, the assertive lexeme gossiping accompanying by indirect speech component is not understood as lexical overabundance. The latter also serves as an intensifier of the negative connotation in the utterance.

This extraction of female defamatory discourse examples is a random sampling. Almost all represented in COCA examples are used with negative connotation intensifiers. It means that the society perceives female gossiping as more injurious and destructive in comparison with male or self-referential discourse. This assumption can be supported by Coie's affirmation that "women are also more likely to express aggressive feelings by gossiping and spreading false rumors" (Coie et al., 1995).

As for self-referential discourse, no matter of what gender the speaker is, the assessment of gossiping is rather neutral than emphatic: (4) However, telling stuff to my best friends wasn't gossiping, it was data sharing. (M. Marks. Forget me knot).

The male discourse of gossip, on the contrary, is less negative in its nature. The assertion tends to be neutral: (5) Shuffling swarms of excited people, oblivious of the chill in the air, leaned into one another, gossiping, chatting, glancing toward the Hunterdon County Courthouse that dominated the small-town street (E. Ifkovic. FIC: Cold morning: an Edna Ferber mystery). The homogeneous parts of the sentence gossiping, chatting and glancing do not contain any negative connotation, that's why they cannot be considered as intensifiers. It's just listing of neutrally colored lexemes, denoting "innocent" actions. They tend to neutralize negative assertion conveyed by the participle gossiping.

The male defamatory discourse of gossip is seldom used with intensifiers in comparison with female discourse. Confer:

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1 The psychologists deny this fact (E. Cueto, 2016) but language examples regularly conf rm it

(6) If he was in a hurry, it was a short conversation; if he had time to gossip, then we gossiped (male discourse); and

(7) The victim comes into view behind the gossiping students as a popular song about rumors swells in the background. The subsequent section of the story features the moment in which the girl learns she is the topic of lunchtime conversation (C. Kelly. The Cafeteria as Contact Zone: Developing a Multicultural Perspective through Multilingual and Multimodal Literacies) (female discourse). The latter example demonstrates a negative perlocutionary effect, conveyed by the lexeme victim serving here as an intensifier of negative assessment.

However, the tricky part of this analysis is that the general assessment of gossip in the society is rather neutral, if to disregard the gender dimension. This is the way how a famous columnist is reasoning upon gossip, for instance:

(8) You know, I mean, that gossip is absolutely …substantive in human nature. We're all constantly talking about each other and about what we think we know or heard or saw, overheard. And we use this sort of medium of exchange between us to enhance the human condition. It helps us figure out what we think. It helps us sort out our ideas morally. Do we approve when we're gossiping? Are we approving, or are we disapproving, or are we trying to figure out what we think? And that a lot of gossip is just this idea of, let me tell you a story. (D. Bianculli. Remembering Syndicated Gossip Columnist Liz Smith)

The result of this part of research is as follows: the gender dimension in interpretation of gossip influences the assessment component of metacommunication. The pragma-semantic functioning of the lexeme *gossip* becomes unstable, flexible and dependent on the fact whether it is used in a female or a male discourse.

The Age Dimension of Cognitive Space in Defamatory Metacommunication: A Child's Gossip

The psychologists argue that children start gossiping at age of 5, but for a very good reason: with the purpose to look out for each other. As they say, it makes gossiping weirdly encouraging at this age. Unlike some negative forms of gossip this type is categorized as "prosocial behavior" which is intended to benefit other people. It is aimed to warn others from potentially bad individuals. They also state that both men and women gossip pretty frequently and tend to find positive component in it, such as promoting generosity, relieving stress and preventing exploitation (Cueto, 2016; Reyazi & Aghaei, 2017; Amiri Mikal et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the other type of gossip is considered to be rather harmful. It's a malicious gossip. The psychologists try to prevent children from this kind of gossiping explaining them all harmful nature of its consequences.

Interestingly enough, the analysis of language examples provides us some facts which do not completely coincide with the psychologists research.

We've studied several English-language forums and collected children's utterances about gossip along with the utterances of adults about children's gossiping.

The experts in psychology's standpoint has coincided with our conclusion that the notion of gossip remains rather complex for the under-tens children. The individual concepts[2] of gossip vary from "to reveal a secret" to "to cast aspersions on, to make a wrongful accusation", the latter is more close to its proper meaning: (9) "I have this friend that used to be so nice but she changed and started gossiping about me! She said that I like this guy …" (Mia, 10 years old). (= to reveal a secret); (10) "Yes, I had 2 best friends: A girl and I had a crush on a boy… So she started gossiping about me and he chose her over me."(Makeda, 9 years old) (=to cast aspersions on).

One of the most popular children's topics of gossips is somebody's appearance: (11)"I was new at my school and I have a brother and sister in a private high school so I was like really preppy. Everyone made fun of me at first but I got in with the 'in crowd' after a while. They make fun of dorky people and they gossip non-stop. I hate it!!!"(Roxanne, 10 years old).

The child appears to be extremely sensitive to gossip, even much more than an adult in a similar discourse: (12) "I hate gossip. It hurts people and the person who rumored or gossiped feels really bad about themselves."(Shaunagh, 10 years old). The word hate lays emphasis on the negative assessment of gossip making the whole phrase more emphatic.

The emotional assessment of gossip tends to become more neutral with aging. And self-referential discourse can reduce it to its minimum: (13) "I cut my hair WAY SHORT and dressed more 'in style' and gossiped and flirted a lot. Then the guy I liked actually asked me out, but he didn't like the fact that I was all preppy so he dumped me the silent treatment way. Then I changed back to my normal self." (Alicia, 12 years old). The meaning of the verb gossip in an individual concept of a 12-year-old girl is equal to "talk a lot", "chatter".

On the other hand, it becomes gender-sensitive as we have already discussed in the part "The gender dimension of defamatory metacommunication" (See above).

It's worth mentioning, that the neutrality of gossip assessment achieves its maximum when speaking about prominent figures. Very often this word is accompanied by an attribute with positive connotation, e.g. good gossip. This is how Nina Roosevelt Gibson spoke about her grandfather: (14) Franklin Roosevelt, from what I understand, always loved

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2 It is termed after John McCarthy, who described individual and universal concepts on the example of "Mike's telephone number" in his art de "First Order Theories of Individual Concepts and Proposit ons". Stanford University, 2000).

to be around people who liked to laugh, who liked to have fun. He loved having fun in many, many different ways. He enjoyed his cocktail hour. He loved good gossip (American Experience interview, 1999).

The similar example is represented in "Current news for people in public media" by Bill Moyers, who tells about Lyndon B. Johnson and Wilbur Mills: (15) They gossiped for an hour or so, shared rumors about friends and enemies, relived old battles in Congress, schemed about bills then pending - and then LBJ began to press the flesh: what Washington called "The Treatment." (Wilbur Mills to LBJ: 'We ain't gonna give money to folks without some strings attached'; May 18, 2006). The meaning of the word gossip is equal to small talks in this context, it's not accompanied by any intensifiers with negative connotation and is not perceived as something harmful and hurting somebody's feelings. The way how a person perceives the meaning of the utterance is better to term as perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1975).

The perlocutionary effect of defamatory metacommunication depends also on some additional dimension which can be termed as "structural dimension of cognitive space".

The Structural Dimension of Cognitive Space: The Type of Observer

A significant role in the Speaker's meaning assessment is played by correlation of the Speaker's communicative role with the role of the Observer in metacommunication. We've analyzed all possible situations and roles where the Observer can act in metacommunication (See Fig. 1). As a result, the Observer coincides with the $Speaker_2$ and almost never with the $Speaker_1$ in self-referential metacommunication. It means that it's uncharacteristic of people to associate themselves with the authors of defamatory utterances, in other words with rude and bad-mannered people. When such roles occasionally coincide, the utterance is associated with some "innocent action", but not a malicious or harmful one (e.g. We gossiped a lot when we had enough time).

The $Hearer_1$ (the victim of defamation, or the Sufferer) can coincide with the $Speaker_2$. We name this role the Internal Observer (he is an active participant of the precedent communication (PC)). He acts as an eyewitness or the victim of defamation and tells someone about it, assessing the $Speaker_1$'s utterance as a defamatory one. In other words he directly accuses the $Speaker_1$ in defamation. Additionally, we can perceive his words as a claim.

The Observer can also speak from hearsay. It's an External Observer (or somebody's words interpreter).

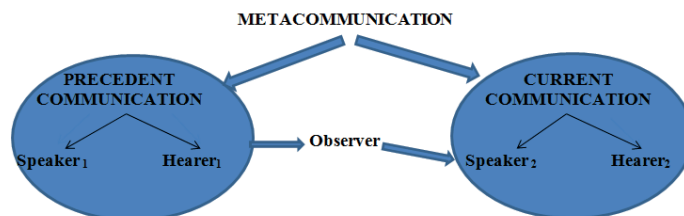When the Observer is an Eyewitness of the PC his judgement tends to be more objective.

Fig 1. The Observer of the Precedent communication coincides with the Speaker of the Current communication

The subdivision within the types of the Observer is rather important, because the coincidence of definite roles influences the usage of defamatory predicates and sometimes makes it impossible. For example, the Internal Observer=$Speaker_1$=$Speaker_2$ is almost impossible in situation of slander (*I'm slandering… or *I slandered…), because it demands the External Observer, who will assess somebody's utterance as a slander ("the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage another's reputation" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019)). The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) gives only two examples with the form I slandered, where one of them is an indirect speech utterance: who says I slandered him, the other is a self-referential one: now I think that I slandered Bergen. The latter was completed by comment that self-deprecation can be disarming against your enemies (SPOK 1996). The communicative strategic component is different in the types of the External and the Internal Observer. If the first type serves as an accuser, the second one (a very rare instance) serves as a person deprecating himself / herself with the purpose of the counterpart's disarmament or apology.

Sometimes the Internal Observer coincides with the $Hearer_1$ (the Victim of PC). It's also a very rare case and it demonstrates the Speaker's intention to rehabilitate himself or prevent the other people from a negative assessment of his actions: (16) I humiliate myself by telling them I'd very much like to join the club and begging Krennup to untie me (G. Saunders. Bounty).

It's impossible to have the same communicative role in the situation of offence (Internal Observer=Victim of PC), because it presupposes the perlocutionary effect of insult for which the External Observer is demanded.

On the same reason the verbs chagrin, discomfit, embarrass, shame and others are almost never used in this communicative role. They presuppose the External Observer whose communicative role doesn't coincide with the Speaker$_1$.

It's almost impossible to say: I am offending you here by saying… because the state of offense is perceived by the victim and assessed by him as offense. In other words it also demands the External Observer. Even if it is possible to say so, it would mean intentional causation of offense, and verbalization of this communicative intention can be regarded as double offense, which contradicts the recommended rules of communication. This concerns the situation when PC and CC coincide in time (simultaneous metacommunication). If PC has happened before, much earlier CC (diachronous metacommunication), it sounds like apology for the previous offensive utterance: (17) I apologize if I offended you, Mrs. Stuart. It was not my intent (J. Dailey. The Proud and the Free) or (18) I'm sorry if I offended you earlier (P. Whitney. Until the End of Time). It is almost always accompanied by I apologize or I'm sorry.

Metacommunication with the External Observer presupposes a communicative strategic variety. It means that one and the same precedent communication can be assessed differently by different External Observers. In other word, this variety is conditioned by proposition deflection through the individual cognitive space.

RESULT ANALYSIS

The variability of pragma-semantic meanings of the defamatory lexeme *gossip* and of the others from the list of defamatory communication lexemes is determined by such intralinguistic reason as blurred concept and extralinguistic reason as dependence on different dimensions of communicators cognitive space. The integrative analysis of intralinguistic and extralinguistic data lets us identify pragmatic content of the lexemes, used by interlocutors in communication and metacommunication. Everything that has been beyond the sight of the researcher while analyzing dialogues or polylogues becomes evident and clear when we activate cognitive space data in research and description of the results of this analysis.

CONCLUSION

The way we have treated defamatory metacommunication in this paper suggests trying to present an integrative approach to the analysis of the pragmatic component of a defamatory utterance which influences the stability of the lexeme meaning. It can strengthen the negative connotation of the defamatory lexeme or neutralize it. It's important to note that pragmatics and semantics of the utterance cannot be analyzed separately because they act as a complex unity, that's why we term this analysis as a pragma-semantic one.

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