

Urbanová, L. (2003) *On Expressing Meaning in English Conversation – Semantic Indeterminacy. Spisy Masarykovy univerzity v Brně. Filozofická fakulta, Vol. 345, 121 pp.*

The monograph by Ludmila Urbanová is a contribution to the field of conversational analysis of present-day British English; it focuses on the representation of semantic indeterminacy. The title itself as well as the author's brief summary in the Czech language at the end draw attention to two key concepts: MEANING and CONVERSATION. The former has been in the center of interest of linguists concerned with lexical semantics and pragmatics; the latter is given consideration in the field of stylistics and its branches (conversational analysis, discourse analysis etc.). Urbanová continues in her research in the field of stylistics and supplements her earlier studies on conversational style with a semantic dimension.

Language professionals have striven to define the concept of meaning since the early 1960s, which is the time point when meaning officially was given full attention. Thanks to the research directed towards unveiling the nature of meaning, it is possible to recognize those discourse features that determine the choice of language means in relation with a particular communicative situation. Urbanová focuses on SEMANTIC INDETERMINACY, i.e. that aspect of meaning which manifests the modal nature of an utterance, gives the utterance a particular evaluating accent and implies subjectivity; all in all, it is that aspect that adds to the interpersonal character of communication. The basic idea of the monograph is that the illocutionary force of the utterance is modified through indirectness, impersonality, attenuation, accentuation, and vagueness. Each of these features and their manifestation in conversation is discussed in separate chapters. Structurally speaking, they make the core of the monograph; they are preceded by three more general chapters dealing with the issues of conversational style, and form and meaning in conversation; and they are followed by two chapters concerned with the potentiality of meaning and corpus linguistics. The area under examination is thus divided into ten chapters.

The analysis is conducted making use of the corpus of spoken texts that was partially made public under the title of *A Corpus of English Conversation* (edited by Svartvik & Quirk, Lund 1980), and partially accessible in the Department of English Language at Lund University. The author had access to the texts during her research stay at Lund University in Sweden in 1994 and 1995. The texts concerned are *impromptu speech* texts, i.e. spontaneous, unplanned or minimally

planned expression of one's personal attitude whether in public or personal environment. The author's aim is to observe the phenomenon of indeterminacy in several genres, which is why she centers her attention on face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation and interviews. The texts provide the author with an outlook on the above-mentioned features in terms of the frequency of their occurrence in present-day Standard English; thus, the author does not limit herself to the mere theoretical defining of the features (i.e. from the viewpoint of semantic and pragmatic meaning). Thanks to this approach the monograph is a contribution to both theoretical linguistics and the study of authentic language, namely spoken discourse.

The theoretical framework of the conducted research stems in Functional Pragmatics of the Prague School. The monograph is devoted to the author's teacher and colleague, Professor Jan Firbas (1921–2000), whose name will be forever embedded in Czech linguistics in relation to the theory of functional sentence perspective. The concept of communicative intention, which was in the center of attention of Functional Pragmatics of the Prague School, is also a key concept in Firbas's approach. His approach represents a point of departure for the author's theoretical considerations and practical application in the field of discourse analysis. The author views the Prague School's approach as a linkage of cognitive, social and cultural perspectives in screening a language and communication. She strongly upholds the view and manifests that clearly in presenting the results and conclusions of her research. In one of the introductory chapters, Urbanová argues about the features of conversational style and presents the linguists that were influential in her research. She considered the works by Halliday (*Spoken and Written Language*, 1990), Crystal and Davy (*Investigating English Style*, 1969), or Nosek (*Notes on Syntactic Condensation in Modern English*, 1964) very inspiring. In addition to the ideas of these distinguished linguists, she proposes her own understanding of the context, her definition of conversation as a speech behavior, as well as the claims for the basic element of spoken discourse. This material represents a primer for the empirical part of the monograph.

The author describes the indicated features of semantic indeterminacy as (p. 98) „výraz výpovědní neurčitosti, t.j. nezřetelnosti významu“ [„the expression of indeterminacy of the utterance, i.e. obscurity of meaning“]. Succinctly, she:

- links indirectness with implicitness; within indirectness she considers socio-cultural aspects (with reference to Lyons 1995, Poldauf 1964, Weber 1993, Schiffrin 1997),
- points to the implications brought about by intonation (Urbanová 1984),

- contrasts emotive and informative characteristics (Sapir 1961, Halliday 1970),
- presents criteria for evaluation of indirectness (Crystal & Davy 1969, Leech 1983),
- pays attention to semantic and pragmatic aspects of indirectness (Wilson & Sperber 1988, Hymes 1984, Schiffrin 1994),
- describes impersonality by means of pragmatic categories of ‘involvement’ and ‘detachment’; she refers to these authors: Chafe (1982), Schiffrin (1994), Leech (1982),
- introduces attenuation and accentuation through language means with a high level of subjectivity; they bring the effect of weakening or strengthening the intensity of the phenomenon; with regard to these two features, she emphasizes their capability to engrave a particular conversation with mutual co-operation between interlocutors; she refers to Palmer (1990), Leech (1980), Van Dijk (1997).
- As the author claims, vagueness occurs when one of Grice’s principles is violated; as a feature of semantic indeterminacy, it implies ambiguity and obscurity of lexical meaning; she also brings to attention the case when vagueness appears in a communicative situation intentionally; the reference is made to Grice (1969), Crystal and Davy (1969), Halliday (1990), Channell (1994), Ullmann (1962).

The awareness of how significant the above-mentioned phenomena are makes us pay attention to the issues of the potentiality of meaning; and this, in real-life conditions, has to be interlinked with the area of linguistics such as corpus linguistics, since it is only thanks to corpus linguistics that we can obtain the collection of data necessary for further research in this field. This might be the reason why the author points to this field and why she devotes some space to it in her monograph. The way how a speaker expresses his/her attitudes is related to his/her communication aims to either weaken or strengthen the illocutionary force of the utterance. Different communication strategies can serve as means decoding the level of speaker’s involvement, or as means indicating the truth value of the presented information. The author’s research presented in the monograph shows that a spoken utterance is internally linked with the phenomenon of semantic indeterminacy. Language, in its dynamics, offers many opportunities and provides considerable space for observing cultural and language conventions; this is clearly evidenced by Urbanová’s monograph.

Alena Kačmárová