

## Language as dialogue

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*Abstract*

*This summary gives an introduction to the volume “Language as dialogue. From rules to principles of probability” (Weigand 2009), which traces the development of my thinking about language and languages within the last two decades. The volume assembles a series of articles, some of them unpublished before. The topics of the articles are manifold and far-reaching; they include, for instance, speech act theory, pragmatics, semantics, lexicology, language comparison, corpus linguistics and language use in institutions. Language turns out to be a concept that is intrinsically connected with other human abilities such as thinking, perceiving, and feeling. Consequently, what is necessary in theory is a change from reductionism to holism, from separating components to integrating and reconciling them in a genuinely holistic model. Such a change has been made by means of the model of the dialogic action game or the Mixed Game Model (MGM) based on principles of probability.*

**1. Rethinking language**

The object “language” is not so simple as it might appear at first glance, manifesting itself as something that can be perceived, as an object that seems to be concrete, delimited, the object of a discipline “linguistics”. But it has always confronted us with ever new questions and revealed a complexity which cannot easily be grasped in theory. We cannot assert that we know how language works, we can only approach it. The concept of “language as dialogue” is a step on this path that requires that we advance from more simple concepts to the complexity of human action and behavior. The development of my thinking about language from a rule-governed system to a holistic concept is traced in the volume “Language as dialogue. From rules to principles of probability” (Weigand 2009).

Various concepts and explanations have emerged since scholars have been addressing the mysteries of language. Obviously, the issue is how to define language, how to represent the object “language” in theory. In general, two ways seem possible: from the object to the level of representation or vice versa. Linguists either started by constructing a model at the level of representation or by gathering so-called “data” of what is believed to be the object. Both ways result from methodological postulates, either of abstraction to underlying rules or of reduction to what can empirically be grasped at the surface. Methodology, however, needs to be recognized as an instrument of analysis and cannot be the starting point nor the end of the line. The parameters of analysis change as our view of the object changes. We started with a concept of language as a sign system and it was only at a very late stage that we were prepared to recognize its limits and realized the necessity of extending our view to embrace a concept of language as “language-in-use.” Language-in-use does not mean “the sign system put to use” but means a completely new object “language-in-dialogic-use” or “language-as-dialogue.” Basic premises are: “language is primarily used for communicative purposes” and “communication is always dialogic.” By emphasizing use as dialogic use we are able to go beyond what has been called the pragmatic “perspective” and obtain a crucial methodological device for handling the vast field of pragmatic use.

Dialogic use of language means dialogic interaction. The focus is on language action and no longer on expression and content in the traditional sense of a linguistic theory of signs. Human beings act and react in the process of negotiating meaning and understanding. Rule-governed models of communicative competence are not capable of grasping negotiation in performance. But how can the “marriage” of competence and performance be brought about in theory? General rules need to be replaced by principles of probability which will guide human beings in the complexity of performance. Human beings are able to come to grips with complexity by their extraordinary ability of competence-in-performance. They tackle the uncertainty of life by adapting to ever-changing conditions. It is in the human mind where the “marriage” of competence and performance comes about.

## 2. The model as starting point

When I began thinking about dialogue in the 1980s, I could not imagine a theory not based on abstraction. On the one hand, sociological approaches based on spoken language lay outside what theoretical linguists considered a theory. On the other hand, despite Austin’s appeal that we should start from “the total speech act” (1962:147), holism was no more than a catchword. I took refuge in Manfred Eigen’s dictum (1981: 224) “*Komplex ist die Realität, aber*

*einfach sind ihre Prinzipien*” (‘Reality is complex, its principles are however easy’), and interpreted the “simple principles” as underlying rules and conventions (Weigand 1989). The premise that the model had to be taken as a starting point was beyond dispute. The model was inevitably considered to be a closed or rule-governed model. Theorizing meant reducing the complexity of reality to a system of rules. Only in 2003 was I ready to consider “principles” as “principles of probability.”

By the end of the 1980s I was still fascinated by scientific rigor and rational rules. I did not consider the fact that models of communicative competence such as Hundsniischer’s Dialogue Grammar (1980) were only an extension of models of language competence. Restriction to rules and conventions were taken as a merit, not as an obstacle to tackling the actual issue. Instead of focusing on the ideal speaker who is able to generate all the grammatically correct sentences of a language, scholars of Dialogue Grammar, including myself, focused on the communicative competence of a speaker who uses “well-formed utterances” in a dialogue. We introduced the hearer and went beyond Searle’s monologic speech act theory (1969) by considering the hearer as the interlocutor who responds to the speakers’ actions. In the model of Dialogue Grammar, however, the interlocutor was presented as a doubled speaker insofar as both followed the same pattern of rules. It took some time and criticism from outside to recognize that the concept of dialogue in Dialogue Grammar was still a reduced concept not capable of coming to grips with real dialogue in life.

### 3. Communicative competence under fire

In time, the model of Dialogue Grammar faced some criticism that I could no longer ignore as being issues simply outside of the scope of the model. Going beyond rules and patterns became a catchword of this period. But what lies beyond rules and patterns? What will happen if we take the other route, as does conversational analysis, and instead of underlying rules take so-called empirical “data” as our starting point? Or give up the concept of consistency, like some pragmatic approaches, and simply add individual inferences to the general rules of language as a sign system?

Obviously, the scientific scene had changed after the first edition of my book was published in 1989: concepts of performance, such as individuality and negotiation of meaning and understanding, which had been excluded before, became of paramount importance. But how can we proceed from a general model to what is actually going on? The issue of how to bridge the gap between competence and performance took center stage. The discussion focused on two possibilities: starting from competence and differentiating the rules so far as to comply with individual language use, or starting from individual spoken

language and trying to find “new” rules “emerging” from ever-varying discourse. Competence and performance defined as “order” versus “disorder” resist in principle any connection. They are combined in the mind of the language users, in their extraordinary ability of being-competent-in-performance. The object of theory needs to be changed from theoretical constructs to human beings as central reference point of any theorizing. This idea prevailed in my reflections in the period of transition from a model of communicative competence to a model of competence-in-performance. To tackle the issue adequately in theory was left to the third period of my research when I developed step by step the model of the dialogic action game or the Mixed Game Model.

There are obviously problems a theory of competence cannot settle. To declare that they do not fall within the scope of the theory represents a theoretical weakness. We cannot overlook the fact that the dialogic game is not a chess game restricted to the same rules for both sides. Misunderstandings inevitably occur; emotions cannot be switched off. Adamzik (1995), on the one hand, acknowledged that Dialogue Grammar had extended traditional speech act theory but, on the other hand, emphasized the fact that genuine dialogue does not come about by doubling the speaker side. Post-Chomskyan approaches, for instance, Brown (1995), pointed out that understanding cannot be presupposed and individuality needs to be addressed. The limits of general rules had been broken. Well-formed utterances were replaced by authentic texts. In this crisis of traditional theorizing Martinet’s appeal “not to sacrifice the object’s integrity to methodological exigencies” provided some guideline for a new beginning (Martinet 1975:10).

Challenges of this type directed my view to the complexity of performance human beings are obviously able to cope with. Whereas Dialogue Grammar excluded cognition and focused on verbal patterns, I recognized that the core of human interaction is the *mind* where all variables are integrated, all seeming paradoxes reconciled: competence and performance, reason and emotion, self-interest and respect, speaking, thinking, perceiving and feeling. Reconciliation does not mean addition, but integration and interaction. Some scholars had already fundamentally criticized the compositional view, without however indicating a way out of the problem (e.g., Harris 1981; Baker and Hacker 1984). Fortunately, the guidelines we had already set up when we reflected about human beings’ behavior were finally experimentally proven by natural sciences. Physics had already made the paradigm change from classical physics to modern physics more than half a century ago (e.g., Gell-Mann 1994). Neurology and biology provided new experimental results that proved the integration and interaction of human abilities (e.g., Damasio 2000; Wilson 2004). We became aware that certainty was an illusion in life and in science (Toulmin 2001; Simon 1983). The inevitable consequence was a paradigm change from reductionism to holism in theorizing. Closed models had to be opened up; rules had

to be based on probability. Complexity could no longer be avoided, and we felt able to address it.

#### **4. The complex as starting point**

The first issue to be settled was circumscribing the complex. The adventure in the complex not only means changing from abstraction to arbitrariness or from general rules to ever-varying spoken language. The complex must not be equated with chaos. The complex means human beings' ability to mediate between order and disorder, between regularities and chance. A theory of competence-in-performance needs to trace how human beings "come to terms with whatever life throws at them" (Sampson 2005: 193). Life is performance, i.e., a way of no return. Human beings are able to cope with the overall rule of performance that anything can be broken by chance. Uncertainty can only be met by principles of probability. The methodological basis of the theory therefore has to be principles of probability. There are rules and norms in performance but they no longer have a strict and general validity. They are dependent on whether human beings decide to apply them or not. Human beings turn out to be the central reference point of any advance in the complex.

The second issue of how to open up the complex is dependent on the question why human beings use language. Different answers have been given in the history of linguistics, to mention only the assumption that we use language in order to express our thoughts. Assumptions and even arguments are nothing other than speculation as long as they lack verification. Regarding human behavior, the only criterion capable of verification is, in the end, evolution. Why should evolution be guided by what remains in the heads of individuals? Language has evolved because human beings are social individuals who need language to communicate effectively. Language has not evolved as human ability of thinking but of speaking. As such it is unvaryingly bound to other human abilities and interacts with cognition and perception from the very beginning. Consequently, there is no language as such, only the ability to speak, which cannot be isolated or dealt with separately if we want to explain its role in language use. The key to opening up the complex is human beings' purposes and needs which arise from living in a community. For social purposes, expressing our thoughts does not suffice; language is needed for us to negotiate our purposes in dialogue.

In this way we start from the complex, i.e., human beings' ability of competence-in-performance, and open it up by human needs and purposes. Adhering to a holistic procedure we first need to grasp the communicative purposes of social individuals in a comprehensive way so that we can then derive from it the individual purposes by differentiation. I consider "coming to an understanding"

or “reaching a joint decision” to be the general purpose of any dialogic language use. This does not mean “agreement” but “negotiating our individual purposes.” From negotiating our individual positions we can derive, step by step, all the dialogic action games human beings are involved in not by adding further specific features but by differentiating or specializing what is already contained in the complex purpose of “coming to an understanding.” Differentiation was already the method I used in developing a comprehensive dialogic speech act taxonomy in the first edition of my book “*Sprache als Dialog*” (Weigand 1989), which was still bound to conventions. Later I recognized that Simon’s concept of “specialization” which is crucial for his “architecture of complexity” is precisely what I had called “differentiation” (Simon 1962).

Starting from such general reflections I developed the model of the dialogic action game which was finally called the Mixed Game Model (MGM). It was experts of dialogic practice who coined the term, Italian advocates of the *Consiglio Nazionale* who had invited me to a conference in Rome. They immediately identified the dialogic action game as “a mixed game,” *un gioco misto*, in practice as well as in theory. Different interests and human abilities are integrated in the mixed game. To describe it adequately means extending orthodox linguistics so that it becomes a kind of humanized linguistics, i.e., a discipline that is inevitably connected with all the other disciplines dealing with human action and behavior.

## 5. The Mixed Game Model

Let me now introduce the nuts and bolts of the MGM which takes up the challenge of addressing the complex object in a genuinely holistic way. The first step is to articulate premises that circumscribe the object more precisely. Competence-in-performance is an extraordinary ability rooted in our brain and shaped by our way of life. Wilson’s studies in the sociobiology of human nature (1975) can be considered a experimental proof of the assumption that human beings are social individuals whose behavior is determined by their biological nature as well as by the environment. Human beings pursue individual interests but at the same time they inevitably have to take account of their living in a community. To analyze their behavior more precisely, it will be useful to distinguish between the environment shaped by human beings, i.e., the cultural environment, and the natural environment that exists on its own. We can learn from sociobiology that the cultural environment is not an exclusively external environment but becomes internalized over time by what Wilson called “epigenetical rules.” I therefore distinguish three determinants that shape human competence-in-performance: human nature, culture, and the external environment not created by human beings. From these determinants we

can derive premises that characterize our object more precisely. I began developing premises in an article of 2000 when I first introduced the term “dialogic action game” and differentiated them in the years to follow. A comprehensive account of the whole theory will be given in my book “Dialogue: The mixed game” which is to appear soon. By focusing on “language as dialogue,” the ability of speaking can be integrated in the sociobiology of human nature. Speaking, thinking, perceiving, and having emotions are not separate abilities but interact and are dependent on each other.

Due to restrictions of space, I cannot describe *the premises* in detail but can only list some basic constituents, first *those derived from human nature*:

- Human beings are the central reference point for all our reasoning about the world and our way of life. The world can only be grasped as far as human abilities reach.
- Human abilities are integrated and interacting abilities.
- Human beings are dialogic individuals.
- Human beings are goal-directed beings having needs, purposes, desires that guide their action and behavior.
- Human beings are persuasive beings; they want to get adherence, i.e., to be accepted.

Culture influences human behavior as habits and values externally as well as internally. Epigenetic rules allow us to explain certain ways of human behavior as determined by “culturgens” (Lumsden and Wilson 2005: lxvi). Such particularities are specific to certain communities and cannot simply be put aside or changed. I therefore assume the following premises as *derived from culture*:

- Human beings are cultural beings.
- Culture influences interaction as an external system of values and habits.

Beside premises derived from human nature and culture, we need to derive premises from the way human beings cope with the external environment. Events and action conditions change as time changes. Human beings need to adapt to ever-varying circumstances. They first focus their attention on regularities. If they cannot obtain a satisfying picture, they include particularities and make individual inferences. They thus start from standard cases and proceed to specialized cases. I therefore assume the following premises as *derived from the external environment*:

- Human beings adapt themselves to the ever-changing environment.
- Human beings start from standard cases and proceed to particular ones.
- Human beings derive subsystems by specialization.

To illustrate this procedure let us imagine that we are involved in complex interactions, for instance, business interactions. We cannot clearly see what is

really going on because we cannot grasp all the relevant variables at once. What are we doing? We pay attention to what seems especially crucial. We tentatively identify some regular case. If this does not fit actual performance, we advance by tentatively bringing in particular, individual inferences until we can reach understanding, at least to a certain degree. Orientation in interaction in a world of uncertainties is thus revealed as a tentative process on the basis of probabilities.

The second step in developing a holistic theory demands *deriving methodology from the premises about the natural object*. Let me illustrate how we can do this: from the premise that our abilities are integrated, we can derive the methodological principle that we use different abilities at the same time as communicative means: we do not speak, and subsequently think and perceive; on the contrary, we speak and think and perceive and have emotions at the same time. Consequently, coherence can no longer be considered a matter of the text or spoken language but turns out to be a matter in the mind of the interlocutors. I distinguish between:

- Constitutive Principles which constitute human interaction,
- Regulative Principles which are always involved by the way how human nature works, especially by the interaction of reason and emotion and by the mediation between self-interest and social concerns,
- Executive Principles that guide the interlocutors as strategies from behind of what is said.

Again, I cannot explain these principles of probability in detail here but have to refer the reader to my book “Language as Dialogue” (2009). I only want to illustrate how this methodology of principles, especially of the Constitutive Principles, works by analyzing an example in the following advertisement:

(1) Toyota does not break down.

In order to understand what this slogan means and why it is expressed this way, we have to go beyond traditional views of linguistics and speech act theory:

- It is functionally not a monologic phrase but is put forward as an initiative action to achieve a reaction not only of understanding but also of acceptance by the interlocutor. The *Dialogic Principle proper* of action and reaction represents the basic unit of language use.
- The Dialogic Principle proper is intrinsically connected with the *Principle of Action*. We need to know what “action” and “reaction” means in order to understand that they are not arbitrarily connected. The initiative action makes a claim to truth or volition that is expected to be “fulfilled,” positively or negatively, by the reactive action. In this way, any action in language use is dialogically oriented, either as initiative action or as reaction. A single notion of “illocution” for any type of speech act is not sufficient.

- What constitutes an action is not sufficiently grasped by defining “illocution” like Austin and Searle as “what happens in locution.” Distinguishing between locution and illocution is certainly an important step but needs to be clarified more precisely. The Action Principle defines any action – practical, communicative, mental – as the correlation of some purpose and corresponding means. If you want to cut a tree, you need a saw. If you want people to do something, you need communicative means.
- Regarding the communicative means used in our example, we need the basic *Principle of Coherence* to describe and explain that we often mean more than we say. Communicative means are not defined in an artificial system; they are used by individual speakers to negotiate meaning and understanding. Human beings use different integrated abilities when communicating. Example (1) cannot fully be described at the verbal level of what is said. What is meant is only revealed if underlying cognitive means of inferences and rhetorical strategies are included. What is said can be described as the literal meaning of a statement; that is, of an utterance with a claim to truth. What is meant is revealed if we include the inference that people prefer to choose a car that “does not break down”. The actual meaning therefore is a request or a claim to volition: the interlocutor is called upon to buy a Toyota.

The methodology of the Mixed Game Theory allows us to derive a *dialogic speech act taxonomy* by differentiating the general basic function of dialogic interaction, i.e., “coming to an understanding” (cf. also Weigand 2003). Human interaction can be based on two fundamental claims: a claim to truth and a claim to volition, which correspond to the basic mental states of belief and desire. In initiative utterances we make a claim, in reactive utterances we are expected to “fulfill” this very claim. From the basic dialogic unit of action and reaction we can thus derive the basic action games:

- (2) Representatives ↔ acceptance  
       Directives       ↔ consent  
       Exploratives   ↔ responses  
       Declaratives   ↔ confirmation

Moreover, we can differentiate these basic types further to subtypes by specifying the claim and introducing propositional criteria, which results in a comprehensive hierarchic taxonomy. Representatives games, for instance, can have a simple claim to truth that “this is the case” or a modal claim to truth, for instance, that “this could be the case.” They therefore include not only assertions and statements but also presumptions and suppositions beside other subtypes:

- (3) The earth is round.           simple claim to truth   assertion  
      The earth could be round.   modal claim to truth   presumption

## 6. To sum up

The volume “Language as Dialogue” focuses on how the Mixed Game Model has been developed step by step during the last two decades, extending the dialogic speech act theory explicated in Weigand (2003). The aim is to trace in theory what human beings do in performance when coping with the challenges of life. They need to mediate between general rules, individual performances and chance, between the individual’s self-interest and the respect expected towards the other human being, between reasoning and having emotions in order to maintain their place in the community. Human beings are able to do this on the basis of their competence-in-performance. To describe this extraordinary ability we need to open up the limits of traditional linguistics and try to develop a “humanized linguistics” which is capable of achieving consilience with the other disciplines engaged in studying human behavior (Wilson 1999).

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