

Toward a Neo-economy Principle in pragmatics

Mingyou Xiang ^{a,b}

^a School of Foreign Languages, Beihang University, Beijing, PR China

^b Xinyang Normal University, Xinyang, Henan, PR China

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that language use is under the influence of economy concerns, together with the rest of human behaviors. Such influence has been identified in many aspects of language use, including phonology, syntax, and pragmatics, and its impact upon the language has been generalized into formulas and principles. By a thorough review of the earlier literature, however, this paper finds that the earlier principles of economy are imperfect, in that they view language use as static, isolated and one-sided. We instead argue that language use should be viewed dynamically, and that the effort and utility of interlocutors should be evaluated jointly, against the effect required by the communicative goal in a certain speech community. Basing on this observation, as well as insight from economics, we propose the Neo-economy Principle that every effective utterance is the result of the interlocutors' efforts to strive after the optimal equilibrium of the cost and utility in their verbal communication. More specifically, the optimal equilibrium is subject to the control of five maxims: the Maxim of General Equilibrium, the Maxim of Common Presuppositions, the Maxim of Proximal Choice, the Maxim of Conformity, and the Maxim of Utterance Utility, which serve as a guide to a successful act of communication. It is hoped that such a theory may offer a better account of speech acts from the perspective of economy.

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1. Introduction

Speech has long been viewed as a form of human behavior (Austin, 1962; Firth, 1957; Grice, 1989; Skinner, 1957; Zipf, 1949) under the influence of the same factors that exert influence on other human behaviors. Among these factors, economy has been regarded as one of the shaping forces of language, whose influence is observed on all fundamental issues which concern linguists. A scan through the linguistic literature has identified three senses of economy in the study of linguistics. First, the word is used to denote the politico-economic conditions of a speech community that have a strong impact on language maintenance and language policy (Daoud, 2011; Grzega, 2011; Novak Lukanovic, 2011; Phillipson, 2008; Walsh, 2006). The second use of the word is to denote the communicative economy. This sense is similar to Saussure et al.'s (1966) famous observation that language is a value system in which the sense of each symbol is determined by its relation to other symbols. The third use can be summarized as "linguistic economy". This sense refers to the seeking of the most economical expression of a message, i.e. spending less effort to say more. Such a tendency has been reported by studies both of the language system (Altmann, 1985; Prince and Smolensky, 2004; Martinet, 1955; Sinclair, 1991), and of language use (Grice, 1989; Horn, 1984; Levinson, 2000; Sperber and Wilson, 1995), both in synchronic and diachronic aspects (Gelderen, 2004; Hopper and Traugott, 2003; Jespersen and Haislund, 1909). Although the research areas represented by the first two senses of economy are as interesting and no less important than

E-mail addresses: xiangmingyou@163.com, xiangmingyou@buaa.edu.cn.

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the third, the major concern of this paper lies in that third sense, i.e. economy in the linguistic system. In particular, we focus on the pragmatic mechanisms that enable interlocutors to communicate with the least effort, and we aim at identifying a set of principles and maxims which serve as a guide for the optimal configuration of language output. As we shall see in the rest of this paper, the issue of economy deserves special attention because (1) it is extremely powerful in influencing the behaviors of the interlocutors and therefore shaping language use; and (2) the previous accounts of such mechanisms are less persuasive, for their perception of language use is too narrow to account for the linguistic phenomena which seem extravagant at first sight but are in actuality economical in nature.

This paper, therefore, ventures to propose a new principle of economy. The paper is divided into the following sections: section 2 reviews the issue of linguistic economy, with special focus on evaluating the models and mechanisms in previous works. Section 3 sketches the new principle of economy and its five maxims, which bases itself on a more comprehensive perception of language use and communication. Section 4 concludes the paper by discussing the possibility of merging the insights of economics and linguistics.

2. Principles of economy in previous literature

In this paper, the word “economy” refers to the status of optimal equilibrium between cost and effect, and the term “linguistic economy” denotes that status in language related phenomena. Such a definition may seem too broad to have any limits on the topic under question, and it may seem to bear little relevance to linguistics, but it also might be the only way to cover such the wide range of definitions, theories, and principles of linguistic economy in current literature. In addition, this definition offers a set of criteria for further categorization, i.e. we can group similar opinions by gradually breaking down the senses of vague terms such as “language related phenomena”, “cost”, and “effect”. And the differences among these opinions, as we shall see later, actually stem from their different perceptions of language.

A brief scan of the literature suggests that “language related” phenomena can be divided into two big groups: those relating to the *language system*, and those relating to the *language use*. The former views language as a contextually independent system of signs and of rules governing their combination, and studies those features which reflect the impact of economy. The latter, on the other hand, takes a much more contextually dependent view of language, i.e. language is studied in terms of its actual use in communication, between two interlocutors who are aware of the social and discursive settings of the ongoing conversation. Research along this line aims to find the linguistic mechanisms which guarantee smooth communication at the cost of least efforts.

2.1. Economy in language system

In previous research, the effects of a certain linguistic system are usually measured in terms of its productivity, that is, its ability to provide forms which are fine-graded enough to convey the subtle differences among senses. On the other hand, the costs of a linguistic system are measured against the difficulty in acquiring, using and maintaining the system. The state of economy is achieved whenever the simplest form has the greatest semantic potentials. This achievement has been identified in almost all layers of language systems and in both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Synchronically, economy is regarded as one of the important features of a language system and is confirmed in all major areas of research, most notably in phonology (Kager, 1999; McCarthy, 2008; Prince and Smolensky, 2004), lexicology (Sinclair, 1991; Zipf, 1949) and syntax (Chomsky, 1995; Collins, 2001; Johnson and Lappin, 1999; Radford, 2009). Diachronically, economy is recognized as a major force in shaping the life cycle of the system, both in the sense of its evolution as a whole (Gelderen, 2004; Hopper and Traugott, 2003), and its acquisition by children as a miniature (Plunkett, 2011; Rothman, 2010). The following paragraphs will try to offer a brief account of the major findings of the previous research along both lines.

Economy has long been regarded as a key feature of human phonological system. Martinet (1955) introduced the notion of “economy” into the structural phonology of the Prague School, which was later developed by Diver (1979) into a new phonological theory called Phonology as Human Behavior. It holds that the interlocutors’ need of maximum communication and the human nature of minimal effort are constantly at odds, and it is the struggle between them that shapes the phonological system and motivates its changes. The idea of economy in the phonological system is also reflected in Optimality Theory. This theory regards language as “a system of conflicting universal forces” (Kager, 1999:4) among which the two most prominent forces are Faithfulness and Markedness, which are constantly in conflict because the former requires language to preserve as many contrasts in form (i.e. pairs of marked and unmarked features) as possible in order to express the contrasts in meaning, while the latter limits the quantity of these formal contrasts, in that “there will be some cost associated in terms of markedness” (Kager, 1999:6). Every language is a balance between these two forces. Many experimental works have also confirmed these observations (Coetzee, 2008; Nevins, 2007).

Economy is also regarded as a shaping force of the lexical system of a language. Previous studies have proved that the vocabulary system of a language is shaped by the rival economical demands of the speaker and hearer. For instance,

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