Jürgen Habermas

On the Pragmatics of Social INTERACTION

PRELIMINARY STUDIES IN THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

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Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action

Jürgen Habermas

Translated by Barbara Fultner

Polity

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Though substantially revised, this translation is based on Jeremy Shapiro's original translation of the Gauss Lectures when they were delivered at Princeton.

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Translator’s Introduction

Philosophy in the twentieth century, in both its analytic and continental traditions, has been shaped by what has come to be known as “the linguistic turn.” Be it in metaphysics, epistemology, or value theory, philosophy of language has become a keystone of conceptual analysis. Most profoundly perhaps, the linguistic turn has affected the conception and understanding of reason. It is no longer possible today to defend the universal validity of a transcendent, objective reason, nor can language be regarded any longer as a neutral tool at reason’s disposal. The role of this movement in critical theory is due in large measure to the work of Jürgen Habermas. And yet, in an increasingly postmodern era, Habermas has remained a defender of modernity. While the reason of the enlightenment has come under general attack, he continues to endorse its emancipatory potential, albeit in the altered form of a “postmetaphysical” reason that is always situated in contexts of interaction. Habermas locates the roots of rationality in the structures of everyday communication such that the critical power of reason is immanent in ordinary language from the start. The aim of his intersubjectivist account of “communicative reason” is to displace both subjectivist accounts that cling to Cartesian conceptions of monological selfhood and objectivist accounts that ignore the agent’s perspective entirely.

The essays and lectures collected in this volume explain why Habermas considers a linguistic turn to be necessary, how he thinks it is to be worked out, and what he takes its implications to be. They address questions concerning the nature of social interaction and its connection to communication, and they trace the implications for developing an adequate social theory. They will be of interest not only to readers who have followed Habermas’s intellectual development but also to those looking for an introduction to his theory of communicative action. More generally, philosophers of language will find in these essays a host of original ideas on the relationship between language and society.

Since its publication in 1981, Habermas's *The Theory of Communicative Action*[1] has been widely acclaimed for its contribution to philosophy and social theory. However, its two volumes are daunting, not only for reasons of length, but owing to the breadth of its subject matter and the denseness of its argumentation. The essays and lectures in the present volume provide a less arduous route to understanding the theory behind that larger work. They are a partial translation of *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns,* which was published in 1984 and contains not only preliminary studies leading up to the fully developed theory of communicative action, but also several essays that complement *The Theory of Communicative Action* in important respects. The first part of this volume, “Reflections on the Linguistic Foundation of Sociology,” formed the text of the Gauss Lectures that Habermas delivered at Princeton in 1971.[2] These lectures are driven by the same theoretical aim that underlies *The Theory of Communicative Action,* namely, the attempt to ground a theory of society on the foundations of communicative rationality. They provide a largely self-contained account of the philosophical motivations behind the theory of communicative action as well as an elucidation of its theoretical grounding in what Habermas called first *universal* and later *formal pragmatics.* The presentation of the issues here is more accessible than in *The Theory of Communicative Action* precisely because Habermas is occupied with laying out the general parameters of his project and situating it relative to other theories of society. Moreover, he discusses certain issues here, such as “systematically distorted communication,” that he has not addressed in the same detail again. In short, these “preparatory studies” offer important aids to understanding his mature philosophy and social theory.

Habermas’s interest in the theory of language and meaning has always been motivated by his work in social theory and the theory of action. Throughout his career, he has sought to integrate philosophy and empirical social research, in particular to illuminate the foundations of social theory while remaining faithful to the methods and results of empirical inquiry. His primary concern has been with problems of social action and action coordination, and with the use of communicative reason as a means of addressing such problems. The resultant theory of communicative action accords a foundational role to linguistic communication, inasmuch as communicative action, as Habermas understands it, is action oriented toward reaching mutual understanding, which he regards as the inherent telos of language. In acting communicatively, an agent seeks to reach an understanding with another about something in the world. The goal of formal pragmatics is to identify the universal conditions and presuppositions of such processes of reaching mutual understanding in language. The terms “universal” and “formal” draw attention to key claims of this theory: (1) the presuppositions it identifies are unavoidable if communication is to take place at all; (2) it is not concerned with the pragmatics of particular speech situations but with a general “species” competence; and (3) it reconstructs formal rather than substantive conditions of reaching mutual understanding. For Habermas, the structures of communicative rationality are to be found in the formal structures of speech; rational principles of deliberation are implicit in the structure of ordinary language communication. Thus language, reason, and action are inherently intermeshed.

The Gauss Lectures mark the beginning of Habermas's appropriation of speech act theory and contain the first formulation of his formal pragmatics.[3] His central concern is with explicating the "binding and bonding" force of speech acts, which underwrites what he calls their action-coordinating power. For this purpose, speech act theory offers several advantages. First, it focuses on *utterances* rather than sentences and thus aims to be a *pragmatic* theory of meaning, rather than a semantic theory completely abstracted from contexts of use. Second, it gives formal recognition to nonassertoric uses of language and to that extent departs from typically "cognitivist" approaches to semantics. Third, speech act theory analytically separates a speech act's prepositional from its illocutionary component, which makes it possible to distinguish between what speakers say about the world and the intersubjective relations they establish in doing so.[4]

What originally prompted Habermas to apply this linguistic approach to social theory was his desire to steer a course between two dominant paradigms in social science, neither of which can provide a satisfactory model. The first is the objectivist paradigm, which assimilates the social to the natural sciences. It examines social situations entirely from the external perspective of an observer looking for patterns of behavior. This approach is characteristically uninterested in *agency* or in what a given behavior means from the engaged perspective of the agents involved, and as a result, it fails to provide an adequate account of intersubjectivity. A prime example of this type of approach is classical behaviorism. The second paradigm is the subjectivist, which adopts the point of view of participants and construes society as a meaningfully structured whole. This approach is interested in intentional actions rather than mere behavior, it acknowledges the centrality of interpretation, and it views subjects as implicated in constituting their worlds. However, it too fails to provide an adequate account of intersubjectivity, not because it ignores the perspective of the agent, but because it gets caught in the monological perspective of a Cartesian subject. And that perspecdve makes it hard to see how meaningful societal structures can be formed at all. In other words, the subjectivistic approach has difficulty explaining how it is possible to break out of the constructions of a solitary constituting subject into a genuine social reality. Nonetheless, the connection between constitution and interpretation provides Habermas with the opening he needs to give critical theory a linguistic turn: an adequate social theory must account for the fact that subjects in interaction encounter the world and one another as *meaningfully* structured.

Habermas offers a third—communicative—paradigm that takes intersubjectivity into account from the start and regards language as its proper medium. The differences between the subjectivist and objectivist paradigms turn on their respective decisions to allow or reject “meaning” as a basic, irreducible concept. In Habermas’s view, to understand the nature of intersubjectivity, we need to understand how agents interacting with one another arrive at the same interpretations of their situation; in this respect, intersubjectivity is grounded in sameness of meaning. Habermas regards communication in language as the paradigm case of achieving such “identity of meaning” and thus holds that linguistic normativity cannot be reduced to mere behavior in the sense of the objectivist paradigm. To distance himself from the subjectivist paradigm, Habermas goes on to argue that the normativity of meaning must be based on the intersubjective (rather than merely subjective) validity of a rule. Thus, intersubjectivity is to be explained on the model of how two different individuals are able to use a term with one and the same meaning.

That interlocutors succeed in assigning the same meanings to their actions and circumstances attests to their mastery of what Habermas calls “communicative competence.” On this view, if we can delineate the structure of communicative competence, we will also have captured the structure of communicative rationality. Habermas’s formal pragmatics aims to provide a rational reconstruction of this competence, that is, to transform an implicit knowledge, a know-how, into a “second-level know-that.”[5] This is not to say, of course, that a speaker actually has representations of the reconstructed knowledge “in the head.” Her know-how is pretheoretic: a skill or mastery of a practice in the Wittgensteinian sense. Subjects capable of speech and action have acquired a tacit mastery of rule-governed practices that enable them to reach a mutual understanding with one another about the world. Successful communication requires, then, that *the* rules constituting such communicative competence be valid intersubjectively.

Habermas uses Husserl, Sellars, and Wittgenstein as foils for his own account. The subjectivist and objectivist paradigms are represented by Edmund Husserl and Wilfrid Sellars respectively. In *The Cartesian Meditations,* Husserl explicitly sets himself the task of reconstructing intersubjectivity from a subjectivist starting point. (The tradition of interpretive sociology initiated by Alfred Schütz is rooted in this Husserlian enterprise.) Habermas argues that Husserl’s phenomenology of consciousness fails in the end to establish the intersubjectivity of a community of transcendental egos, and so he turns to Sellars. Sellars’s approach is initially promising because he wants to model intentionality and the structure of thought on the structure of language: He takes a linguistic turn within the philosophy of mind. However, his understanding of language, according to Habermas, is essentially objectivist. That is, speakers come to mean the same things by the same words because they respond similarly to their environment and mutually observe each other’s responses from a monological, third-person perspective rather than from a dialogical second-person perspective. They are “monological language users” with a full, intentional (inner) life of beliefs and desires, but lacking any interpersonal relationships. But monological language that cannot be used for purposes of communicating with others, Habermas argues, is not really language at all. Thus, in different ways, Husserl and Sellars both presuppose rather than account for the existence of intersubjectivity.

It is no accident that Habermas’s argument against Sellars is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s private-language argument. Sameness of meaning is grounded in the validity of rules, and Habermas, following Wittgenstein, argues that a subject cannot follow rules in isolation. If someone is following a rule, it must be at least in principle possible for someone else to check whether she is following that rule correctly; one person’s rule-following behavior is, in other words, subject to evaluation and criticism by another. This precludes any monological account of rule-following, for it presupposes that different people have the same competence and are mutually capable of assessing each other’s performance.[6] Wittgenstein emphasized that meaning is a matter of use and that words and sentences are used in interaction with others; his “use theory of meaning” was in this sense inherently pragmatic and intersubjective. As action and language are intimately interwoven, to understand an utterance is to grasp its role in a language game, that is, to understand it as a move in a rule-governed, interpersonal activity. Thus being able to engage in a language game presupposes sharing a form of life with one’s interlocutors. The rules constitutive of such language games are not stipulated arbitrarily, but have the status of conventions, a topic to which I shall return below.

Habermas elaborates on Wittgenstein’s account in two ways. First, he aims to develop a theory of the structures of intersubjectivity: Though Wittgenstein’s language games clearly suppose dialogical relationships among participants in interaction, he does not analyze these relationships as such. Second, Habermas wants to do more justice than Wittgenstein did to the fact that language refers to the world.

The early Wittgenstein attempted to elaborate a purely cognitive language, the prime function of which was to represent the totality of facts that make up the world. The later Wittgenstein aborted that attempt because, in Habermas’s terms, he discovered communicative language use(s). In other words, he came to realize that language can be used for all sorts of purposes other than cognitive ones and, according to Habermas, henceforth mistakenly downplayed the importance of the cognitive use altogether. By contrast, Habermas maintains that reaching mutual understanding requires a speaker and hearer to operate at two levels: the level of intersubjectivity on which they speak with one another, and the level of objects or states of affairs about which they communicate. His discussion here is arguably the best, most extensive elucidation of his conception of the “double structure of speech.” He makes it clear that the two uses of language are *interdependent* “A communicative theory of society must do justice to the double cognitive-communicative structure of Speech” (p. 64). This dual structure underlies the reflexive character of language: Natural languages can function as their own meta-languages, as Donald Davidson, for example, has also pointed out. According to Habermas, we cannot communicate about things or states of affairs in the world without also “meta-communicating” about what we are doing or how we are using the content of what we are saying. It is here that speech act theory enters the picture.

Every speech act takes the form *Mp,* where M expresses the illocutionary force of the utterance (the communicative dimension) and *p* expresses its propositional content (the cognitive dimension) about which mutual understanding is to be reached. In this sense, all speech acts have a cognitive and a communicative dimension.

Habermas's key move in linking communicative rationality with a theory of meaning is to connect the theory of meaning with a theory of argumentation and justification. There is, as he puts it, a "validity basis" to speech; all speech acts carry an implicit commitment to justification, to giving reasons that back one's claims. When we use speech acts to communicate with one another, we move, as Robert Brandom has recently reminded us, in "the space of giving and asking for reasons."[7] Or, as Habermas puts it, every speech act raises certain claims to validity that are open to being challenged and defended with reasons. The illocutionary component of an utterance expresses validity claims a speaker raises in performing speech acts. Habermas initially identifies four such claims: intelligibility, truth, normative rightness, and sincerity or truthfulness. That is, in making an utterance, a speaker simultaneously raises the claims that what she says is intelligible, that the propositional content of what she says is true, that she is making the utterance in the appropriate social context, and that she is speaking truthfully. Following on this, Habermas classifies speech acts into four types, each of which corresponds to one of the four validity claims: communicatives (e.g., speaking, asking, replying), constatives (e.g., reporting, asserting, claiming), regulatives (e.g., ordering, requesting, demanding, reminding), and expressives (e.g., knowing, thinking, fearing, hoping, wishing). Communicative speech acts are used to make explicit the nature of an utterance itself. In constative speech acts, speakers represent states of affairs in the objective world and refer to something in that world. In performing regulative speech acts, speakers establish intersubjective relationships with interlocutors and thus relate to a social world. In expressive speech acts, speakers refer to things in their subjective world by making public intentions, desires, or other private states or occurrences. In *The Theory of Communicative Action,* the number of validity claims is reduced to three; intelligibility drops out, leaving truth, normative rightness, and sincerity.[8]

Communicative action takes place against a background consensus that it renews and develops. When communicative interaction is proceeding smoothly, interlocutors make what they are saying intelligible to one another, grant what they are saying to be true (i.e., they assume the referential expressions they are using pick out objects to which the attributes they predicate of them actually apply), recognize the rightness of the norm that the speech act claims to fulfill, and don't doubt each other's sincerity. In short, they mutually accept the validity of the claims being raised. In this "normal" case, a speaker uses expressions such that the hearer understands the speaker as the speaker wants to be understood, she formulates propositional contents such that they represent experiences or facts, she expresses her intentions (sincerely), and she performs speech acts such that they conform to recognized norms of accepted self-images. At the same time, participants in communicative action are assumed to be prepared to reach mutual understanding—that is, their attitude is communicative rather than strategic (oriented toward realizing one's own ends). As such, they are assumed to be accountable, that is, capable of justifying their actions and expressions. Accountability thus refers to a general presumption of rationality, cashed out in terms of one's readiness to justify the claims one raises. Because, normally, in raising validity claims, a speaker takes on the warrant to make good on them, formal pragmatics as a theory of “communicative rationality” can serve as a foundation for a *critical* theory. As a speaker can be called upon to justify the claims raised in her utterances, the burden of justification and the possibility of critique are built into the very structure of language and communication.

When the consensus underlying smoothly functioning communicative interaction breaks down and the flow of the language game is interrupted, particular claims to validity may be thematized. To redeem problematic claims to truth or to normative rightness, we must resort to a level of argumentation that Habermas calls *discourse,* through which we seek to attain a *rational* consensus on these claims. But how are speakers able to distinguish a true (or rational) from a false (or merely contingent) consensus? Note that we routinely assume, as a matter of fact, that we are able to do so, and that, in this sense, speech is fundamentally rational. To model the assumptions built into the ideal of rational discourse, Habermas introduces the notion of the *ideal speech situation.* The ideal speech situation is subject only to the “unforced force of the better argument”; it is devoid of all other constraints. All interlocutors are equally entitled to make assertions, raise questions and objections, or provide justifications for their positions. And all express their true intentions. It is crucial to remember that discourses *as a matter of fact* usually do not manifest the conditions of the ideal speech situation, but the model can serve as a standard in identifying deviations from the ideal of rational consensus.

The question of whence the justifications for thematized validity claims are drawn brings us to the notion of the lifeworld, which is complementary to that of communicative action. The lifeworld provides a context of relevance within which communicative actions (and actors) are “always already” situated. As such, it always remains in the background, standing “at the backs” of participants in communication, as it were. It cannot be transcended: Speakers and actors cannot act by placing themselves outside of it. It has, on the contrary, a transcendental character insofar as it functions itself as a condition of possibility for communicative action. In this sense, it functions as a background of mutual intelligibility. Intersubjectively shared, it makes possible the smooth functioning of everyday communicative action. In general, speakers do not have explicit but only tacit knowledge of it; nonetheless, the lifeworld provides communicative actors with a shared stock of taken-for-granted interpretations on which they can draw in trying to understand others. In discourse, elements of this implicit knowledge can be rendered explicit in order to redeem validity claims that have been challenged. This connection between universal pragmatics and the lifeworld is discussed in the fourth Gauss Lecture, where Habermas defends the linguistic turn in phenomenology and suggests that universal pragmatics aims to elucidate basic structures of the lifeworld. Thus we can see that he early on conceived communicative action and lifeworld as complementary, a connection he later strengthened and elaborated in *The Theory of Communicative Action.*

Of special note is Habermas’s discussion of truth in the Gauss Lectures, for truth claims enjoy paradigmatic status as validity claims (p. 86). When we raise a truth claim, we use language cognitively. And Habermas’s discussion of cognitive language use in the Gauss Lectures focuses on questions of reference and perception—elements that are not emphasized in his subsequent articulations of formal pragmatics. When attributing a property to an object, he claims, a speaker presupposes that the object exists and that the proposition she asserts is true. That is, she assumes that the subject expression has a referent and that the predicate can be correctly applied to it. Habermas here endorses a description theory of reference. Interestingly he also states that our experience is in the first instance sensory and only in the second instance communicative (p. 79). In light of recent criticisms to the effect that he needs a theory of reference to avoid some form of linguistic idealism, the Gauss discussion is therefore important.[9]

It is also important because it contains an early treatment of the so-called *consensus theory of truth,* which emerges from Habermas's account of the discursive redemption or vindication of validity claims. As we have seen, a claim is discursively vindicated if rational consensus is reached concerning its validity, and the meaning of truth, according to Habermas, is explicated by specifying the conditions under which validity claims can (or could) be vindicated. All of this suggests an epistemic conception of truth as what is rationally agreed upon under ideal conditions. The interest of the "consensus theory of truth," however, lies not so much in what it says about the nature of truth, as in what it says about how we reach agreement on claims to truth. Thus it is not so much a theory of *truth* as a theory of *justification.* And in fact, Habermas has since abandoned an epistemic conception of truth and has developed this conception of rational consensus primarily in the context of his theory of discourse ethics, which he developed after the completion of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.[10]

While the Gauss Lectures focus on truth as a dimension of validity, "Intentions, Conventions, and Linguistic Interactions" (1976), an essay more explicitly located within the philosophy of action, focuses on the validity of social norms and examines the conceptual interconnections between rules, conventions, norm-governed action, and intentionality. Rather than establishing the need for a theory of communicative action on the grounds that other theories have failed to provide adequate accounts of intersubjectivity, Habermas is here concerned to demonstrate the need for a theory of action that is intersubjective. The concept of communicative action is to account for intentional action, that is, action caused by internal intentional states (in Brentano's sense) of the agent, as well as for norm-conforming action or behavior in the sense of action in accordance with external rules. The essay aims at developing a concept of communicative action (or, as he puts it here, interaction mediated through interpretation) that incorporates both intentional and norm-governed action. Habermas concludes that the two models of intentional and norm-governed action that he discusses are complementary, and that linguistic communication can be seen as constitutive for both. But he does not advocate assimilating or reducing social to linguistic theory. Indeed, he argues against taking language as a paradigm for rule-following, or assimilating semantic and social conventions and taking the former as paradigmatic of the latter, since this would obscure the crucial distinction between communicative and strategic action. Rather, he conceives conventions "in the sense of valid—that is, intersubjectively recognized-norms" as a subset of rules of action in general. The latter includes rules of instrumental action and strategic rules as well.

The duality of cognitive and noncognitive orientations continues to play a role in this essay as well. Habermas draws an analytic distinction between two types of intentionality, one referring to a cognitive relation to a world of objects, the other referring to the stance a subject adopts toward the propositional content she is expressing. Intentional action can be understood on the model of teleological action, in that the agent has a goal that she intends to accomplish and which thus functions as a cause of her actions. When we examine intentional action with a view to the agent's cognitive relation to the world, it is possible—up to a point—to understand this relation monologically. That is, we can consider her as an individual in isolation from others and independently of the culture in which she lives. But as soon as we try to give an account of how the agent comes to have the goals she has, this model begins to break down. For her goals depend on her desires and other intentional states, which in turn result from what Habermas calls her “need interpretations.” These in turn are a function of the agent’s cultural values and norms, and this means that intentional action cannot be accounted for monologically. Rather, our account of need interpretations requires looking at how subjects interact in accordance with mutually recognized norms and values, and this establishes a nexus between intersubjective cultural traditions and individual needs.

One of the negative consequences of starting from the teleological means-ends model is that values and motives of action are represented as private needs and wants—the most serious flaw of an empiricist ethics, in Habermas’s view. But if a person’s motives are to be intelligible to others, need interpretations must be intersubjective, although their intelligibility does not yet constitute a normatively binding standard. An intelligible motive is not yet a justification; the latter requires reasons that all can share: “To say that a norm is valid is to say that it claims to express a universalizable interest and to deserve the consent of all those affected” (p. 122). This formulation anticipates Habermas’s subsequent formulation of the principle of universalizabilily of discourse ethics. More importantly, however, these relatively early writings show the deep connection between the universalizability of interests and their origin in intersubjectivity. Insofar as our wants and needs always appear under some interpretation, they presuppose a community that has a language containing evaluative expressions, which in turn are rooted in an intersubjectively shared tradition of cultural values. These values become normatively binding when there is a consensus that is reproduced in language and sedimented in the form of conventions.

Conventions, of course, are commonly appealed to in order to explain how we understand one another. Habermas does not presuppose that there simply *are* such conventions that make mutual understanding possible any more than he presupposes that there simply *are* subjects who abide by them (let alone stipulate them). Instead, relying on G. H. Mead's analyses, he offers a developmental account of how such conventions are established as normative expectations presupposed in speech acts.[11] Once we accept that both having intentions and acting in accordance with norms presuppose linguistic interaction, we can understand how subject formation is the result of linguistic interaction, how we are socialized in and through communicative interaction.

Finally, the essay "Reflection on Communicative Pathology" (1974) seeks to address the question of deviant processes of socialization—a topic that any developmental account of interactive competence must address—and contains an analysis of the formal conditions of systematically distorted communication. Habermas's guiding assumption here is that the development of interactive competence is connected to the development of internal mechanisms for controlling behavior, but that these two developments are distinct (since moral judgments and actual behavior in conflict resolution do not coincide). His analysis stresses the connection between linguistic communication and ego development: "Communicative action is the medium of socialization" (p. 131). Picking up on a theme mentioned above, this essay establishes the connection between subjectivity and intersubjectivity by showing that a subject's intentions are socially, that is, intersubjectively, structured.

Habermas wants to show that both social and individual pathologies can be analyzed in terms of disturbances in interactive competence. Such an account, however, presupposes a model of *undisturbed* or *normal* communication and interaction in the terms of his formal pragmatics. On this approach the notion of normalcy is not determined by any particular culture, nor is it a statistical norm; it is rather a culturally invariant normative notion.

Habermas has been criticized for presenting too idealized an account of communication, particularly owing to his notion of the ideal speech situation. This last essay shows that he is very much attuned to the empirical vagaries of communication. In claiming that the validity basis of speech has transcendental status, Habermas certainly does not mean to imply that we cannot deviate from the conditions of normal communication; otherwise, we would not have to explicate the *normative* basis of speech. The conditions of possible communication are thus not transcendental in the same sense as, say, Kant’s transcendental intuitions of space and time qua conditions of possible perception. Nonetheless, the formal presuppositions underlying communication are, according to Habermas, *unavoidable.* Moreover, as such they function somewhat like *regulative ideals* in the Kantian sense, They are not inviolable, but in cases where the internal organization of speech is violated, the patterns of communication are pathologically distorted. “We have already seen that interlocutors may challenge the validity claims raised by others and thereby prompt communication shifts from action to discourse. It is also possible that the claims to intelligibility, truth, rightness, or sincerity are continually suspended or flawed without prompting such a shift. If this happens, the result is systematically distorted communication. The kind of violation of the universal presuppositions of communication that leads to systematic distortion is not the result of a lack of competence in the language, a misconception of the level of discussion, or a retreat from communicative to strategic action. These all involve a cessation of communicative action, whereas in the cases that Habermas has in mind, communicative action continues in spite of the violation of its formal presuppositions. The strongest cases of systematic distortion are those in which the speaking subjects themselves are unaware of their violation of communicative presuppositions, such as when a competent speaker expresses herself unintelligibly without realizing it, when one spouse deceives herself about her feelings for the other, or when a speaker thinks she is acting in accordance with social norms but is actually violating them.

Ideally, the rejection of a validity claim leads to discourse, in which the speaker seeks to justify the claims she is making; or the speaker shows by her actions that she is sincere. But this does not happen in cases of distorted communication that stem from conflicts that cannot be quite suppressed yet must not become openly manifest—because, for example, they threaten the identity or self-understanding of one or more interlocutors. This sort of situation results in a kind of paradox of systematic distortion of communication, for the very validity claims that are being violated "serve to keep up the appearance of consensual action" (p. 155).

This discussion makes clear that the idealizations required by this model of communication may fail. However, the idealized model allows for a systematic understanding of the different *sorts* of failure and provides the norms or standards for *criticizing* them.

As the empirical literature upon which Habermas draws in this discussion indicates, systematic distortions connected with subject-formation occur particularly often within families. Not only is this a context in which people's identities are formed and confirmed, it is a context in which a particularly high premium is placed on communicative rather than strategic action. On the one hand, families are expected to function as units; on the other hand, the needs and wants of individuals have to be met within the family structure. Thus there is a tension and potential conflict between the orientation toward mutual understanding and the orientation toward individual need satisfaction. Failure to resolve such conflicts explicitly can lead to systematically distorted communication, in which members employ different strategies for maintaining or producing a “pseudo-consensus.” They may seek to safeguard an endangered consensus and prevent challenges to it by, for instance, interrupting or breaking off conversation, reformulating a disagreement as an agreement, falsely reciprocating another’s action, or—in the most extreme case that threatens the very intelligibility of their utterances and actions inasmuch as incoherence violates the norms of rationality—behaving inconsistently. The notion of systematically distorted communication evidently introduces a third option between the successful completion of a speech act and what J. L. Austin terms a “misfire” in which the speech act itself fails.

Habermas links a family’s potential for conflict to power relations, claiming that a “family’s ability to solve . . . problems stands in an inverse relation to its internal potential for conflict. The latter in turn is a function of the distribution of power” (p. 161). He does not, however, suggest that a healthy family must succeed in transcending power relations. Rather, he allows for a “healthy” distribution of power, which, nevertheless, is connected to an “asymmetrical distribution of opportunities” for gratification. Once again, there is a clear recognition that empirical circumstances—even in communicatively structured contexts—diverge significantly from the ideal speech situation.

While these lectures and essays provide a good introduction to the theory of communicative action, they are also transitional in nature: They form a bridge between Habermas's work of the 1960s and that of the 1980s. His linguistic turn was initially motivated by the conviction that a critical social theory required a sound methodological and epistemological foundation: hence the project of providing a linguistic grounding for sociology. However, the project of developing a comprehensive theory of rationality, which is what the theory of communicative action in effect attempts, cannot be carried out merely from the methodological perspective of finding an alternative to objectivist and subjectivist social theories. Thus Habermas soon found it necessary to develop an account of the presuppositions of action oriented toward reaching understanding independently of an account of the transcendental presuppositions of social-scientific knowledge.[12] This helps explain why the distinction between cognitive and communicative language use, which is so central in the Gauss Lectures, becomes less prominent in his subsequent formulations of the theory of communicative action.[13]

At the same time, while Habermas has been working out a complex theory of action, he has also elaborated his conception of speech act theory and of formal pragmatics to serve as the basis for a social theory of meaning. Since the writing of the Gauss Lectures, he has developed a systematic classification scheme for theories of meaning, in which he distinguishes formal semantics, intentionalist semantics, and use theories of meaning. In his view, each of these focuses on but one of the three functions of language that an adequate theory of meaning must incorporate. As we saw, in communicating, we represent facts about the world, we express our subjective states, and we interact with others; and these three functions correspond to the three validity claims of truth, sincerity, and rightness that formal pragmatics analyzes.[14] In his recent work, in addition to speech act theory, Habermas also draws on Michael Dummett’s assertibilist semantics, according to which the meaning of a sentence (or utterance) is given by the conditions under which it is acceptable to hearers. Developing this aspect of formal pragmatics once again underscores the aspects of rationality and intersubjectivity; for to say that understanding an utterance is knowing the conditions under which it is acceptable entails that a speaker-hearer does not fully understand a given utterance unless she knows what reasons could be offered to back up the claims raised in the utterance. And construed in this way, acceptability conditions cannot be determined independently of an intersubjective practice of argumentation and justification.

Habermas has recendy returned to some of the themes adumbrated in the early 1970s. One of these is the question of the nature of truth, as I indicated above. Another is the distinction between communicative and noncommunicative language use.[15] Yet the views articulated in these early works are not only relevant to Habermas’s current thought; they bear on contemporary philosophical discussions more broadly. Within Anglo-American philosophy, there has been a resurgence of interest in pragmatics and in social theories of meaning that do justice to the intersubjectivity of social interaction. A prime example is Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit,* which is an elaborate working out of a semantic theory based on social practices and, in particular, practices of justification. On Brandom’s view, semantics is based on the giving of and asking for reasons: To give the meaning of a sentence is to articulate the conditions under which its assertion is justified, which is to articulate a web of justificatory relations. However, unlike Habermas, Brandom does not distinguish between irreducibly distinct types of validity claims; the focus of his analysis remains the assertion, which he continues to regard as basic. This constitutes a potential challenge to Habermas's system not only with respect to the irreducibility of the three validity claims to truth, rightness, and sincerity, but also with respect to the status of the assertion within his own framework. Given the profound influence Sellars has had on Brandom, Habermas's discussion of Sellars might also be a potentially fruitful point of engagement, with regard to both semantics and perception.[16] It would be a way of fleshing out the cognitive dimension of language and clarifying its relationship to the communicative dimension, a relationship that lies at the heart of Habermas's project.

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