

# ON THE USEFULNESS OF THE NOTION OF 'CONCEPTUAL COMPETENCE INJUSTICE' TO LINGUISTIC PRAGMATICS

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## Introduction

Quite recently, Anderson (2017) has distinguished a new form of epistemic injustice: *conceptual competence injustice*. This is characterised as the injustice that people are inflicted when they are not recognised as knowers or experts in some domain because of failure to grasp one or various concepts in what is said. Conceptual competence injustice is defined as “[...] a wrong done to a person specifically in their capacity as a knower of those claims that would traditionally be regarded as conceptual and linguistic truths” (Anderson 2017: 210).

Conceptual competence injustice clearly differs from *testimonial injustice*, or the unfairness sustained when the testimony dispensed is thought to be unreliable or false (Fricker 2003, 2007). Here, what is at stake is credibility. Conceptual competence injustice also diverges from *hermeneutical injustice*, or “[...] the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding” (Fricker 2006: 99). The issue here is intelligibility, as a person is not understood as deserved or expected (Fricker 2006: 105-107; 2007: 151). Hermeneutical injustices have no perpetrator (Fricker 2006: 102) and stem from a “[...] hermeneutical lacuna [...] preventing [individuals] from rendering [their] experience communicatively intelligible” (Fricker 2006: 101). They arise when individuals lack the conceptual tools facilitating expression of experience or reference to specific actions or events, so they cannot “[...] make communicatively intelligible something which is particularly in [their] interest to be able to render intelligible” (Fricker 2006: 103).

Conceptual competence injustice also significantly contrasts with *contributory injustice* (Dotson 2012), which originates when “[...] a person has the conceptual tools to comprehend [their] experience [...] and the linguistic tools to articulate it, but [their] attempts at communicating [their] ideas are thwarted by the fact that [the] audience willfully misunderstand [them]” (Dotson 2012: 32). When someone sustains a contributory injustice, what they say fails “[...] to gain appropriate uptake” (Dotson 2012: 32) inasmuch as their interlocutors intentionally, purposefully and decidedly do not “[...] capture the ideas or experiences being

expressed” (Dotson 2012: 32). Consequently, contributory injustices have perpetrators: those who refrain from correctly understanding what the target of the injustice says.

In addition to helping better understand the complexity and diversity of epistemic injustice, the notion of conceptual competence injustice may be most helpful to pragmatics, a field in linguistics which may certainly benefit from it. This notion may contribute to conceptualising an undesired or unexpected *perlocutionary effect* (Austin 1962) of communicative behaviour arising as a consequence of the *accidental relevance* of a conclusion drawn in the search for the *optimal relevance* of verbal stimuli processed, among which lies communicative behaviour (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson 1999; Wilson and Sperber 2004). In what follows I purport to show the usefulness of this novel kind of epistemic injustice and thus argue in favour of incorporating a notion originated in the field of social epistemology into a linguistic discipline. In so doing, I will rely on some claims and postulates of *relevance theory* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), a cognitive pragmatic framework delving into communication and, more precisely, comprehension, which may conveniently account for the origin of some conclusions derivable from human behaviour.

### **Communicative competence**

Speaking a language requires abstract knowledge of the language in question, which feeds a series of interrelated, specialised abilities indispensable for performance. Those abilities, or sub-competences, make up *communicative competence* and have been labelled differently in extant models (Hymes 1972; Canale 1983; Bachman 1990; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995). Among such sub-competences are:

- *Linguistic competence*, or knowing the grammar rules and lexical repertoire of a language, which are the very rudiments of a language.
- *Sociocultural competence*, which involves awareness of social and institutional structures; the social attributes of participants in conversations (age, gender, power, distance, etc.), and the register, style or level of politeness expected, required or allowed in certain situations. These greatly determine what people say and how they say it.
- *Actional competence*, or mastery of a range of (conventionalised) semantico-syntactic structures to mean, but more importantly, to do specific things with words.

Linguistic competence, and more specifically, possession of and ability to use precise and

adequate lexical items, are primordial in communication. Words like nouns ('house', 'cat'), adjectives ('big', 'empty'), verbs ('run', 'bite') and adverbs ('fast', 'slowly') encode concepts, or mental objects that become part of the mental representations entertained during comprehension (HOUSE, CAT, BIG, RED, RUN, BITE, FAST, SLOWLY).<sup>1</sup> Those words are the means to name and allude to people, animals, objects, actions, events, etc. (Wilson and Sperber 1993), even if the concepts they encode may be inferentially adjusted through operations like *broadening* or *narrowing* (Wilson and Carston 2007; Carston 2012). Other words like 'but', 'so' or 'because', in contrast, encode *procedures*, or mental instructions steering the inferences the mind performs when processing linguistic input (Blakemore 1987; Wilson and Sperber 1993). While words in the former category are *conceptual*, those in the latter are *procedural* and "[...] put the user of the language into a state" in which they perform a domain-specific inference at a sub-personal level (Wilson 2016: 11). To put it differently, procedural expressions "[...] point the hearer in a [particular] direction" (Wharton 2009: 61).

### **Lexical (in)competence**

Employing appropriate words turns out crucial for hearers to infer speakers' actual *informative intention* –i.e. the set of assumptions that speakers intend to *make manifest*,<sup>2</sup> or the intended message (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004). Speakers are usually presupposed to be *benevolent* –i.e. they will seek to provide true and *relevant* information–<sup>3</sup> and *competent* –i.e. they are believed to command their native language and its rules of usage (Sperber 1994). True communicative competence involves guiding hearers to intended meaning through appropriate morphological, lexical, syntactic or pragmatic choices. This requires, among others, checking that words and communicative strategies are adequate and do not demand excessive cognitive effort, and that what is said will result in a satisfactory amount of cognitive effects (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995).

Unfortunately, speakers are not always fully competent in a language –think of non-native speakers or learners of a second language– or do not behave competently because of diverse

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<sup>1</sup> Following a relevance-theoretic convention, the mental concepts encoded by some words are notated in small caps.

<sup>2</sup> In relevance-theoretic pragmatics, the notion of *manifestness* refers to the capability of some fact or state of affairs to be mentally represented by an individual (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995).

<sup>3</sup> Relevance is a property of stimuli, which increases as the amount of *cognitive effects* –*strengthening* or contradiction of previous information, or *contextual implications*– increases and decreases as the amount of *cognitive effort* invested in processing increases.

permanent pathologies –e.g. autism, Asperger syndrome, etc.– or temporary mental or physiological states like tiredness, absentmindedness, disease, anger, euphoria, nervousness, etc. (Mustajoki 2012; Padilla Cruz 2017). Among other mistakes, these factors may cause speakers to misuse vocabulary. On some occasions, lexical mistakes do not have very serious consequences, but result in rather funny anecdotes. This was the case of a French person who sought to enquire in a broken Spanish where he could catch a taxi. A mistake when pronouncing a consonant sound in the verb ‘coger’ (‘catch/take’) turned it into ‘comer’ (‘eat’), so they asked “¿Dónde puedo *comer* un taxi?” (“Where can I eat a taxi?”).

Some speakers may also be less competent than others in specific linguistic areas like vocabulary, syntax or pragmatics. As regards vocabulary, individuals may have conceptual deficits or conceptualisation problems originating in mismatches between concepts and words (Dua 1990; Sperber and Wilson 1997; Bazzanella and Damiano 1999). These give rise to *misstatements*, which may lead hearers to utterly misunderstand speakers if no meaning negotiation ensues (Banks et al. 1991). Among misunderstandings stemming from lack or misuse of vocabulary are failure to correctly understand the meaning of the words employed – i.e. the *predicative function*– or failure to grasp what is talked about –i.e. the *referential function* (Weigand 1999). When conceptual expressions are inadequately used or the speaker lacks them, a *pragmatic failure* may arise, as the hearer does not understand what the speaker actually means or the hearer has difficulties to do so (Thomas 1983). Indeed, failures in expressive acts prevent hearers from making the expected or appropriate inferences (Bosco et al. 2006).<sup>4</sup> For instance, if someone asked you to grab them a spoon, when what they actually meant was a stool, you would reach for the spoon and not the stool and conclude that they want to eat or cook, but not to sit down or rest for a while.

When speakers do not succeed at finding adequate vocabulary, they may resort to paraphrases, synonyms, antonyms, pointing, etc. in order to somehow explain what they mean. They may also employ vague terms or placeholders, and trust hearers to inferentially adjust them in order to arrive at what they mean. Doing so is part and parcel of speakers’ *strategic competence*, another component of communicative competence thanks to which communicative problems are avoided or overcome, and mutual understanding is restored (Canale 1983; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995). Nevertheless, lack or misuse of vocabulary, in addition to hindering smooth communication and hampering on correct understanding, may

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<sup>4</sup> Note that to speakers, what they mean may be clear enough, as they tend to be *egocentric* and might not take into account their interlocutors’ mental states (Keysar and Henly 2002; Shintel and Keysar 2009).

have negative perlocutionary effects: they may bias perceptions of speakers as knowers and users of a language. In other words, infelicitous linguistic performance may impact the impressions that hearers forge about speakers.

### **Consequences of lexical problems**

As linguistic input is perceived, it is processed by the mind, which subconsciously performs a wide variety of simultaneous inferences at an incredibly fast pace. Some of those inferences are necessary to assign reference to proper names, pronouns or indexicals –i.e. words like ‘here’, ‘there’ or ‘now’– others enable restriction of the denotation of some of the concepts encoded in the words in utterances; others facilitate recovery of elided material or disambiguation of some word strings; others result in the construction of descriptions of the speaker’s attitude to the proposition expressed or the speech act performed, and others are necessary to arrive at implicit contents or *implicatures* (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). These inferences depend on access to an immense variety of contextual information, which is perceptible in the physical environment or mentally stored. Virtually, there is no limit to the amount and sort of information that the mind accesses, but the mind is normally guided, as a result of evolution, by expectations of optimal relevance: it follows the path of least possible effort and maximum cognitive reward (Wilson 1999; Wilson and Sperber 2004).

Verbal actions like requesting, offering, inviting, thanking, etc., make manifest a variety of assumptions. Consider a request for a glass of water such as “May I have some water?” It may make manifest assumptions referring to the requester’s thirst and willingness to get some water, as well as to the existence of a water tap and glasses in the place where she and the hearer happen to be, and the hearer’s ability to give her some water. The speaker may have intended to make manifest to the hearer those assumptions, so they are *strongly* communicated (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). The hearer will use them as implicated premises in order to reach the implicated conclusion that the requester wants some water and he can give it to her. As a result, the hearer may decide either to comply with the request, which is the expected or preferred perlocutionary effect of the request, or not to comply with it, which is its unexpected or dispreferred perlocutionary effect.

Linguistic performance may also make manifest, to a greater or lesser extent, assumptions which the mind may exploit as premises amenable to yield a wide array of conclusions. Such

conclusions are *weak implicatures* and are drawn as a result of the constant search for optimal relevance. Many of them are not intended by communicators, but hearers derive them at their own risk. Moreover, hearers may not even be fully aware of them or their content, so they are like impressions (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004). For instance, stuttering, some tones of voice or gestures may make manifest assumptions referring to nervousness or anxiety, and lead to conclude that the stutterer is uncertain about something or afraid of someone. Asking for a glass of water through an conventionally indirect request such as “Could I have some water, please?” may make manifest assumptions about the requester’s attitude and prompt the hearer to deduce that she is seeking to be polite.

Unskilled lexical performance may likewise induce people to conclude that a speaker is less competent than expected, or than average, in terms of vocabulary. If during an Old English class a student used the nominal phrases “that symbol” or “that letter” instead of the term ‘thorn’ to refer to ‘þ’, the teacher could conclude that the student has missed several classes or is not very knowledgeable of the Old English alphabet. If, while watching a Holy Week procession in Seville, someone referred to one of the vases or amphoras on a float through the Spanish word ‘jarrón’ instead of using the specialised term ‘jarra’ or ‘ánfora’, a local well versed in this religious festival would very likely think that the speaker is alien to it, has no idea of the various ornaments and decorations in floats, or does not know how to properly refer to them.

### **Lexical problems and epistemic injustice**

What is at stake here is an area of an individual’s communicative competence: lexical competence. While lack of vocabulary may reveal a conceptual lacuna or lack of the conceptual tools to make experience intelligible or to correctly allude to specific items, misuse of words may unveil erroneous mappings of concepts onto words, which similarly prevent a speaker from correctly naming elements in reality according to the addressees or a community of practice’s standards (Sperber and Wilson 1997). Upon lack or misuse of vocabulary, the audience, depending on benevolence and condescendence, the sort of information manifest to them and the inferences they make, may arrive at prejudicial or detrimental conclusions, which might not be in the interest of the speaker owing to their partiality or inaccuracy. Those conclusions may add to the audience’s knowledge about the speaker and become the basis of an epistemic injustice (Fricker 2003, 2006, 2007). It would be ‘epistemic’ because it has to do with knowledge about the person who lacks or misuses words; it is an ‘injustice’ because the

audience, on the grounds of perception of just a part of a person's behaviour, might not construe adequate or fair knowledge about her. In the realm of communication and verbal interaction, epistemic injustices may arise when people perceive that speakers appear less competent than expected or than average in some domain. Epistemic injustices may be unexpected or undesired perlocutionary effects and may negatively bias the testimony subsequently dispensed about an unskilled speaker, thus affecting her reputation. The question that now arises is what type(s) of epistemic injustice lack and misuse of vocabulary may give rise to.

Definitely, none of them may result in testimonial injustices because what is at stake is not the speaker's ability to give information or the truthfulness of the information imparted. Lack of specific vocabulary would not bring about a contributory injustice either, since the speaker lacks the words to correctly talk about specific issues, and contributory injustices arise when, despite possession of appropriate conceptual tools, a person is not understood on purpose. Misuse of vocabulary, in turn, would not trigger a contributory injustice because words do not match the appropriate concepts and the hearer does not willfully refrain from understanding the speaker. Could lack and misuse of vocabulary then result in hermeneutical injustices? As regards lack of vocabulary, there is a conceptual lacuna that prevents the speaker from being understood as they would have expected or desired, so it could be considered to give rise to a *special* type of hermeneutical injustice. However, this would be problematic for two reasons: (i) there is a perpetrator of the injustice, and proper hermeneutical injustices do not have one, and (ii) the injustice stems from negative conclusions about the speaker's performance as a consequence of poor lexical abilities. Therefore, lack and misuse of vocabulary could be better argued to give rise to an epistemic injustice about the speaker's competence, so this is why such injustice may be better characterised as a conceptual competence injustice.

A conceptual competence injustice not only negatively affects the speaker's lexical competence, but also her credibility (Anderson 2017). Since information and people are judged reliable or credible if they suggest sound knowledge about a particular domain, being perceived as lacking appropriate words or misusing them may decrease a speaker's credibility because they exhibit lack of knowledge. When someone suffers a hermeneutical injustice, that person is denied *epistemic trustworthiness* and degraded as a knower (Fricker 2007). When a speaker is inflicted a conceptual competence injustice, they would not be completely denied communicative competence, as they are capable of producing expressive acts, even if defectively. What is at stake is simply a component of communicative competence: lexical repertoire. Competence is a gradual and comparative property: people may be more or less

competent in some domains, at particular moments or in specific circumstances, or more or less competent than other people (Medina 2011). If a speaker sustains a conceptual competence injustice, they could be degraded as a knower of only some domain corresponding to a particular semantic field, but never as a fully competent speaker of a language. The speaker in question would only be degraded as a knower of a language in some respects and could be denied what may be labelled *lexical reliability* or *accuracy*: the ability to select and use appropriate words in order to name objects, animals, events, etc. and refer to them. This should feature as a component of communicative competence. When someone is inflicted a conceptual competence injustice, they are perceived as less competent as regards vocabulary, and a person who is incompetent in terms of vocabulary, and ultimately in conceptual terms, cannot be *veridical* because they lack certain words or fail to use them correctly. Accordingly, that person may receive what Dotson (2011) calls *testimonial quieting*, a phenomenon occurring when an audience do not recognise someone as a knower and refuse to pay attention or accept what they say about a specific domain of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Production of words and utterances may have varied perlocutionary effects, some of which are unexpected or undesired. Lack or misuse of vocabulary may give rise to detrimental conclusions about speakers, which may lead an audience to wrong her. The notion of hermeneutical injustice proves problematic in order to define and characterise such wronging, and so does that of contributory injustice. Another notion alluding to competence is called for, and that is Anderson's (2017) notion of conceptual competence injustice. It may certainly be most helpful to linguistic pragmatics as a way to conceptualise some of the manifold consequences of communicative behaviour.

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