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Whom to (dis)benefit: the principle for determining what/how to say in social interaction

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Abstract: Choices of what/how to say in social interaction are inherently intentional because interlocutors may not mean what they say, and they may pretend to give priority to others' benefits or simply claim or deny in order to (dis)benefit certain participants. Thus, a significant question is on what basis humans choose what to say in order to power and/or (dis)agree or to be (un)cooperative, (im)polite and/or (ir) relevant. Since no intention is benefit-free, it can be assumed that benefit (physical, metaphysical or combinational) weighing on whom to (dis)benefit determines what to say. This principle is the pivot to the reconstruction of connections of intention expression and interpretation in language interaction. Nine basic categories of benefit weighing can be approached for the meaning of specific language choices. Presidential debates and saint dialogues which are salient and family talk which is subtle in benefit weighing are good examples to illustrate this principle. The best result of communication may be achieved when interlocutors disregard their own benefits and speak for the group, the community, or human beings in general. Overall, benefit weighing may serve as the anchor for tackling topics and themes in pragmatics.

Keywords: benefit weighing; family talk; principle; presidential debate

1 Introduction

In a video posted on August 5, 2020 by the Twitter account @TeamTrump, the narrator said, "Deep in the heart of Delaware, Joe Biden sits in his basement. Alone. Hiding. Diminished. Biden has no answers AFTER 5 DECADES OF FAILURE. HE NEVER WILL." It was reported that the photos showing Biden's so-called failure had

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been altered (photoshopped) on purpose.[1] This is a typical example of language used to damage the image of a political opponent, in which we see intentional breaching of principles outlined in pragmatics.

Not only in the quite complicated politics can we find intentional breaching of principles and maxims, but also in mother-child talks we can see the dominance of intention over principles and maxims. See Example (1) from Bruner (1983: 86):

(1) MOTHER: What's that?
CHILD: Ouse.
MOTHER: Mouse, yes. That's a mouse.
CHILD: More mouse (pointing to another picture).
MOTHER: No, those are squirrels. They're like mice but with long tails. Sort of.
CHILD: Mouse, mouse, mouse.
MOTHER: Yes, all right, they're mice.
CHILD: Mice, mice.
(Bruner 1983: 86)

This is one dialogue between a Richard of twenty-three months old and his mother, and Bruner's focus is the negotiation of reference. An important issue except reference in Example (1) is that the mother's reluctance in calling the squirrels mouse turns into compromise. The mother may insist on calling squirrels squirrel, but no mother would argue with a toddler. What is more interesting is that Richard also makes compromise and repeats after his mother with "mice", instead of insisting on saying "mouse" in the end.

The dialogue between Richard and his mother presents us the common language choices in everyday life, and language interactions during negotiations on the one hand; on the other hand, modern linguists are fortunate to see how language is used not as was expected in the face of severe crises in the world. This crises have well-demonstrated distinct facets of language interaction where principles as stated in pragmatics are flouted, particularly in language wars between democrats and republicans in U.S., between various media of different political preferences in the world. Desires and intentions are no longer hidden and disguised, and language interactions reveal its other faces. Conflicts (e.g. Cap 2022; Grimshaw 1990) and language wars (e.g. Lakoff 2000) are everywhere during crises and the word is used as the sword.

This and many other language interactions urge us to ponder: On what basis do humans choose what to say in order to (em)power and/or (dis)agree or to be (un) cooperative, (im)polite and/or (ir)relevant. To put it in another way: What determines the choice of language in social interaction? The purpose of the present research is to provide an answer to this question.

1 https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/07/trump-campaign-ad-manipulates-three-images-put-biden-basement/ (accessed 5 August 2024).

2 Current principles designed for a conflict-free and ideal society

As the branch of linguistics that "studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction and the effects of our choice on others" (Crystal 2003: 120), pragmatics has been deepened in such central topics as implicature (e.g. Davis 1998; Geurts 2010; Grice 1957), presupposition and givenness (e.g. Geurts 1999, 2017; Sauerland and Stateva 2007), speech acts (e.g. Austin 1962; Fogal et al. 2018; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2008; Searle 1969; Widdowson 2004), deixis (e.g. Huddleston 1969; Lenz 2003; Nunberg 1993; Weissenborn and Klein 1982), reference (e.g. Abbott 2010; Campbell et al. 2012; Enfield and Stivers 2007; Huang 1994), relational pragmatics (e.g. Dayter et al. 2023; Locher 2008, 2013, 2014), pragmatic competence (e.g. Falkum 2022), intention (e.g. Acton 2022), and context (e.g. Fetzer 2004; Halliday and Hasan 1989; van Dijk 2008). Studies on these topics have contributed to much of our understanding of the choice of language and its effects on others. With these and many other relevant studies, we may see a clear picture of thinking in pragmatics as follows:

Whatever speech acts are used, language is used to do things for good purposes with the premise that people are speaking and/or writing with good intentions. Influenced mainly by Ludwig Wittgenstein's language games, private language, and language as a form of life, John L. Austin categorizes speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary (Austin 1962). With conditions proposed by Searle (1969), Speech Act Theory has provided readers a theoretical understanding of words and their effects on hearers, though disagreements can be seen in three major theses: speaker's saying may produce multiple effects in various hearers (the multiplicity thesis), almost anything could result from a speech act (the infinity thesis), and the hearer's being affected should be treated as a consequential effect of speaker's saying something (the causation thesis) (Gu 1993).

In social interaction, the speaker's choice of words is decisive because this is the starting point of dialogues. In other words, the speaker's communicative competence should be focused, which may include abilities to judge whether something is formally possible or grammatical (degree of possibility), whether something is psychologically acceptable (degree of feasibility), whether something is suitable in certain social context (degree of appropriateness), and whether something is actually performed (degree of occurrence). Thus, "the goal of a broad theory of competence can be said to be to show the ways in which the systemically possible, the feasible, and the appropriate are linked to produce and interpret actually occurring cultural behavior" (Hymes 1972: 286). Good communicative competence means that certain behaviors with certain intentions are well-performed via the use of language.

To facilitate language interaction, language users are supposed to make good use of speech acts, deixis, reference, presupposition and givenness, etc. in specific contexts so as

to understand implicatures appropriately. To achieve good effects in language interaction, ideology, (im)politeness, face, power, solidarity, convention, identity, relationality, emotion, and various settings with various cultural and social backgrounds have to be considered along with explicit implicatures.

Among these themes, face has been much foregrounded since 1950s. As "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1955: 213), face is quite culture-sensitive. So long as the cultural context is an agreed one, "Those caught out in the act of telling barefaced lies not only lose face during the interaction but in a sense may have their face destroyed" (Goffman 1956: 40). The fact is that culture is rather complex, and even in a very small community of the same culture, some "positive value" may turn to be negative from other people's angle, even detrimental due to different life experiences. Thus, speech acts are considered inherently threatening to the speaker, to the hearer or to both (Brown and Levinson 1987). Both the speaker's face and the hearer's face should be accounted. In this sense, "all acts are inherently FTAs [Face Threatening Acts], since they all require the hearer to do work to understand the speaker's communicative intentions […] nearly all (perhaps all) acts can be construed as non-FTAs under appropriate circumstances" (Fraser 1990: 229). That is to say, FTA is an issue of stance. What is significant here is that, language interlocutors will defend their face if threatened, though it is assumed that they will maintain each other's face at their best.

In a conflict-free and ideal society under a certain culture of the same values or in a very harmonious event with compromises, participants do maintain each other's face at their best, and they follow the principles and maxims as outlined in pragmatics because these "ensure that in an exchange of conversation, truthfulness, informativeness, relevance, and clarity are aimed at" (Huang 2017: 48). Interlocutors will not impose but give options and make listeners feel good (Lakoff 1973). Interlocutors, "on the whole, prefer to express or imply polite beliefs rather than impolite beliefs" (Leech 2014: 34). Thus, they "minimize" cost to other, benefit to self, dispraise of other, praise of self, disagreement between self and other, and antipathy between self and other; they also "maximize" benefit to other, cost to self, praise of other, dispraise of self, agreement between self and other, and sympathy between self and other (Leech 1983: 132).

The principles and maxims, if followed by the majority of human beings, will result in language interaction that is possible in a pantisocracy. When people minimize and maximize in the ways as declared in the literature, they will not be ordinary people but saints. At least, the human society will be so harmonious that no conflicts are possible. In a pantisocracy like this, state machines (e.g. police and army) will be superfluous. The fact is that arms race is still fierce, and a pantisocracy is visible nowhere. These facts confirm that language interactions during conflicts and crises deserve to be emphasized, and such elements as "behavioral expectations, face sensitivities, and interactional wants" are particularly important for understanding human interactions (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 95).

3 The real society and the wording

It is true that "pragmatics should be characterised as *the study of how, and the many means by which, informative intentions are satisfied*" (Heintz and Scott-Phillips 2023, italics in original). Thus, "a major task for pragmatic theory is to describe the pragmatic expectations raised by ostensive acts and explain how they arise" (Allot and Wilson 2021: 443).

Non-conflictual language has been long observed in the literature, but conflictual language interactions deserve to be foregrounded in pragmatics today because the real world, including families in general, is full of conflicts. For example, in risk communication, two fundamental functions have been identified: the pragmatic function (in which senders and audiences are interacting with various intended/unintended effect); the constitutive function ("in which messages re(create) what we mean by 'risk' in a given social context, including how we can, and/or should relate to it" [Rickard 2021: 466]).

In the human society today, people may pretend to be polite, try to make others lose their face, and agree in order to disagree, etc. Indeed, the necessity of considering the entire spectrum is urgent because "conceptualizations of politeness and impoliteness are no longer only restricted to the study of mitigation strategies" (Locher 2010: 3), and the same is true to other conceptualizations.

As was pointed out by Heinrich Heine, "I have never seen an ass who talked like a human being, but I have met many human beings who talked like asses".[2] Thousands of years of human development has greatly enhanced science and technology, but civility and humanity cannot be said to have become better than before. No one would say that modern people are more virtuous than people in ancient kingdoms of Greece, Egypt, or China. In the modern society, we may have far more villains than proper men. Worse than that, a lot of people pretend to be proper men, or they just claim to be proper men but do nothing properly. These have greatly complicated the study of human speech. As to the standard of good speech, Chapter VI of Book XVI in *Analects* by Confucius published in about 430 BC (translated by Ezra Pound) goes as follows:

> When you manage to meet a proper man, there are three committable errors: to speak when it is not up to you to speak, videlicet hastiness; not to speak when you should, that's called covertness; and to speak without noting a man's expression, that is called blindness. (Confucius 1933: 110)

What is pointed out here are the potential errors when we speak to a proper man, but in reality lots of people may not be able to meet proper men at all and this increases the possibilities of committing errors. What is certain is that, in choosing when to

2 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/heinrich_heine_387563 (accessed 21 August 2023).

speak, what to speak, and how to speak, modern people may not do better than people in the time of Confucius. "Choice-making characterizes both language production and language interpretation" (Versheuren 2017: 127), so people are supposed to be very cautious and circumspect in their choices of words if they want the expected results of communication.

On the other hand, human beings are very good at choosing words for their own intentions. They accomplish strategic language conversations consciously or unconsciously, and what they say may be quite political:

> Friends chatting about national policies over coffee (Walsh 2004), parents explaining to their children which presidential candidate their family favours (Gordon 2004), or even family members constructing stories around the dinner table (Ochs and Taylor 1992) have all been identified as political. (Tracy 2017: 739–740)

In such "political" language exchanges, principles illustrated in current literature are always flouted here and there. It is true that "there is some kind of a continuum of politeness" (Fraser and Nolen 1981: 97) and cooperation and relevance etc. as well, but neither those principles nor maxims or the continuums are sufficient in explaining those political exchanges.

Contrary to speaking and behaving "in such a way as to (appear to) give benefit or value not to yourself but to the other person(s), especially the person(s) you are conversing with" (Leech 2014: 3), interlocutors consciously or unconsciously speak for their own benefits in most cases. As is shown in (1), even a toddler knows how to use language strategically for his own benefits. When Richard points to another picture and say "More mouse", he is claiming his knowledge. His expectation is that he will be complimented. His mother's negative reply makes him unhappy and he gets somewhat irritated. His repetition of "mouse" exhibits his power until his mother has to breach the Maxim of Quality, calling a stag a horse. Yet, it seems that little Richard quite understands the subtlety of language interaction and he follows his mother by saying "mice" instead of "mouse" in the end. He seems to be able to save his mother's face anyway. The conversation in (1) breaches maxims, but it is a typically successful dialogue between a mother and a toddler: full of love and warmth. The reason for the success is that the benefits have been fulfilled both on the mother's side (teaching her child; her child's following her use of "mice") and on Richard's side (his knowledge not to be challenged; his mother's compromise).

How about daily conversations between adults? Current literature treats dialogues between adults such as dialogues (2) and (3) in terms of inference and implicature. Dialogue (2) is considered as a typical example for the speaker's following the maxims of cooperation while dialogue (3) as one for flouting the maxims. See dialogues (2) and (3) from Levinson (1983: 104):

(2) S[3] (to passerby): I've just run out of petrol.
L: Oh; there's a garage just around the corner.

(3) S: Let's get the kids something.
L: Okay, but I veto I-C-E C-R-E-A-M-S.
(Levinson 1983: 104)

It is true that "(p)ragmatics sometimes means enrichment, sometimes means meaning subtraction" (Capone 2018: xiv). Yet, the question is still not clear as to what determines the choices of wording, either for enrichment or substraction. Since five basic elements (i.e. S, L, petrol, garage, and corner) are involved in dialogue (2), we may thus have at least 120 possibilities (5!) for the interpretation. If the features of any of the elements change, then more possibilities will arise. One of the possibilities may be that L wearing a face mask is a passerby but S and L are very good friends. The weirdness of the conversation increases if L responds calmly by saying "Oh; there's a garage just around the corner". Interpretations may vary considerably if other elements are taken into account.

Dialogue (3) is considered as an example "where the speaker deliberately and ostentatiously breaches" the maxims (Levinson 1983: 104). It is all right to consider S and L in dialogue (3) as a couple and they are with their kids. In this case, they deliberately breach the maxims because they care what is good to the children as much as how the kids feel. Interlocutors S and L may also be kindergarten teachers who are with the kids, or young interns with some kids. In these cases, the price of ice creams and the work to do after kids' eating ice cream are likely to be the major concern. Numerous other possibilities are perfect for the conversation here.

To make the conversational contribution in a certain context such as is required, "at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange" (Grice 1989: 26), people may try to "make the contribution as informative as is required, be relevant, and be perspicuous" (Grice 1989: 27). This is fundamental in human interaction and it serves as the base for communication. In actual communications which usually go far beyond this base, people intentionally add or delete or alter much of the contribution for various intentions. That is to say, both the intentionality of what a speaker implicates and the conventionality of what a sentence implicates have been understated in the Gricean theory (Davis 1998). Moreover, the intention of interlocutors have been understated in the theories of (im)politeness, (em)power, and (dis)agreement. An extreme but probable case may be that S is a man who tries to cajole children into crimes and L is a very smart boy in dialogue (2), so even though there was no garage around the corner, people would not consider the boy a cheater. Instead, people would appreciate the boy's *pro re nata* for this unexpected contingency.

3 S = Speaker, L = Listener, H = Hearer.

Thus, it is crucial to find out what determines people's choosing how to say. Our assumption is that human beings choose what and how to say primarily out of benefit weighing on whom to (dis)benefit.

4 Benefit weighing as the umbrella principle: nine categories

Benefit weighing refers to the usually intuitive process by which interlocutors determine whom to benefit and/or whom to disbenefit. In a typical social interaction, a speaker, a listener and a third party (the hearer) will be involved in. That the speaker chooses what to speak, the listener selects what to listen, and the hearer likes what to accept, are all oriented by benefit weighing. Generally speaking, the following nine categories are typical for benefit weighing in social interaction.

B1SLH: Benefiting the speaker, the listener, and the hearer
B2SL: Benefiting the speaker and the listener
B3SH: Benefiting the speaker and the hearer
B4LH: Benefiting the listener and the hearer
B5S: Benefiting the speaker only
B6L: Benefiting the listener only
B7H: Benefiting the hearer only
B8G: Benefiting a group or a community
B9HU: Benefiting human beings

The general principle is as follows: The good result of a communicative act will be achieved if each of the interlocutors speaks for the benefit for herself/himself and the other participants involved in, and the poor result will be unavoidable if each interlocutor speaks for his/her own benefit only. The best result will be possible if interlocutors disregard their own benefits and speak for the group, the community, or human beings in general. The way of speaking does not matter much. Good results will not be possible if interlocutors strictly follow the principles and maxims but with ill intentions.

As "a well-intentioned action that confers joy" (Seneca 2011: 24),[4] the quality of benefit is decisive. Benefits should be joyful, youthful, virginal, and translucent and they are "unspoiled, pure, and revered by all" (Seneca 2011: 21). Other things being equal, such benefits if given to interlocutors in communicative acts will bring the most ideal effects. In actual communication, benefit is as secular as what is defined in dictionaries, "a thing well done; a good or noble deed; a kind deed, a kindness; advantage, profit" in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson 2009) for example.

4 Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a Roman philosopher who was born ca. 4 BC and died in 65 AD.

A convenient classification of benefit may be the three kinds of good provided by Plato in *The Republic*: (1) the kind of good that people don't desire its consequences but take delight in it for its own sake, such as enjoyment and harmless pleasures; (2) the kind of good people like both for its own sake and its consequences, such as knowledge, insight, and health; (3) the kind of good people may choose for the sake of payment or other rewards (Plato 1991). Based on the three kinds of good, benefit may be more distinctively put into three types: metaphysical, physical, and combinational.

Among the nine categories (B1–B9) listed above, "benefiting the speaker and the hearer" (B3SH) can be frequently seen in presidential debates. The candidates are trying to say anything possible for the purpose of defaming and dispraising the opponent (the listener), telling the audience (the hearer) that s/he other than the opponent can make benefits possible for the hearer. Such benefits are usually physical-oriented, which intend to satisfy people with better living conditions, and they may also be metaphysical or combinational, by which the hearer (audience) is fed with expectations and constructs.

What matters most is not what is said or how it is said, but the intention or attitude of the participants involved in. Let's elaborate this by observing the category of B1SLH. No matter what is said and how it is said, the participants involved in are all benefited in this case. For example, if in dialogue (2) S is a healthy adult while L is a salesman of petrol who just passes by in a hurry and in S's car there is an H who is going to the airport. In this context, S and L are cooperating for mutual benefit, and H is also benefited. See dialogue (2a) which fulfils cooperation, politeness and face:

(2a) S (to passerby): Excuse me, I've just run out of petrol. Is there a garage nearby?
L: Oh; there's a garage just around the corner. (pointing to the direction of the garage) Look, over there. Two blocks away.

However, dialogue (2a) is only one way of speaking for benefiting all participants. Many other choices are possible for various contexts. Suppose there is a kidnapped H (e.g. a teenager) in S's car and L as an experienced man for such circumstances notices H's sitting in the back with fear in the face. L intends to rescue H so he calmly replies as follows:

(2b) S (to passerby): I've just run out of petrol.
L: Oh; there's a garage just around the corner. (As soon as S drives away, L calls the police).

The language choices in dialogue (2b) are the same with dialogue (2), but we can imagine that S is arrested very soon and H is rescued. H may be in despair at L's response but s/he is going to appreciate L's help in the end. S feels happy at L's response but s/he will be in despair soon. Thus, the dialogue remains the same but it brings benefits to all participants at different phases in distinct contexts.

With the good intention, L may choose many other ways of wording, depending on the situation s/he may hold under control. For example, L as the passerby happens to be an undercover policeman and s/he recognizes that S is a criminal to be wanted. L also notices H (a teenager) sitting at the back with fear in the face. Thus, L in a second pulls out his/her gun and points at S. See dialogue (2c):

(2c) S (to passerby): I've just run out of petrol.
L: (pulling out his/her gun suddenly and points at S, shouting) Hands up. Get out of the car, right now!

Dialogue (2c) is a typical case to illustrate B8G (benefiting a group or a community). It may be rare but reasonably possible. To do something that benefits the community as a police officer and to face a dangerous criminal, the command is the usual choice of wording here. Here L's words flout the maxims or the principles, but the choice is determined by whom to benefit.

Category B9HU will be typical if a saint or saint-like person is speaking. Imagine that S is a very dangerous criminal while L is a saint-like person and s/he also notices the terrified H in the back of the car. Just then, several policemen with guns pass by but the saint-like person does not seek help from them. S/he believes that calling the police for help will most probably hurt H. More importantly, s/he believes that it will benefit human beings to convert S. Thus, a possible dialogue may look like dialogue (2d):

(2d) A (to passerby): I've just run out of petrol.
B: Oh; there's a garage just around the corner, but look, police officers over there. May I get in the car and show you the way to another garage I know?

After getting into the car, L makes full use of his/her talent and talks with S. In the end, S delivers himself to the police, hoping for a better life after several years of prison. The way of saying in dialogue (2d) both flouts and follows the principles, and benefit weighing is the determining force.

With the help of Google Maps and other apps, there will be no need today to ask some local people for locating a destination. In this sense, dialogue (3) other than dialogue (2) is more common an example to illustrate the categories of benefit weighing. Dialogue (3) happens to be a good example for Category B7H (Benefiting the hearer only). However, what L says seems to disbenefit the kids (the hearer). This suggests that benefit sometimes appears to disbenefit and the decisive factor is the intention behind.

When what is said benefits no one or nothing, it is most probably nonsense. As is shown above, the intention behind the communicative act should be used to judge the benefit itself. "It is the intention that exalts what is petty and brings light to what is shabby; intention humbles those things that are grand and generally regarded as

valuable" (Seneca 2011: 24). In the following two sections, we will observe presidential debates, saint dialogues and family talk, for more illustrations.

5 Presidential debates and saint dialogues as salient cases

Benefit weighing is ubiquitous in meaningful discourse, but huge difference does exist in salience. The principle of benefit weighing as discussed in Section 4 can be saliently revealed in such cases as presidential debates and saint dialogues.

First, let's consider the case of 2020 presidential debates in U.S. in which benefit weighing can be more easily recognized. To simplify the roles in presidential debates, we take the moderator as "speaker", the presidential candidates as "listener", and the audience as "hearer". The first of the 2020 presidential debates between Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden surprised the world more than ever, and the (dis)benefit weighing is naturally highlighted. For example, when the debate moderator Chris Wallace asked about the approaches to reopenings, Biden said that Trump didn't have a plan. While Biden was talking about his plan, Trump interrupted as usual. Biden then got angry and said: "Will he just shush for a minute?" Trump didn't stop interrupting in but shifted the focus to Pelosi and Schumer. Hearing that, Biden said Pelosi and Schumer had a plan but they had no chance to meet President Trump, for Trump sat in his golf course.

Now it is quite clear that the principles (either cooperative or polite or other) are flouted here and there in the debate. What one party says is intended for making the other party lose the face. Biden was trying to make the audience believe he had a plan for reopenings. To attain this purpose, he fought back against the defaming and the rudeness. Biden's plan for reopenings, whatever it is, would shake Trump's policy, so Trump couldn't wait to interrupt in. Trump then made it clear that he wanted to keep the country open but Biden wanted to shut down the country. It was unclear whether opening or shutting down would be more helpful to conquer the crisis at the time of debate in 2020. What each party said and how it was said are simply for the purpose of attracting more supporters on the one hand, and for the purpose of defaming the other party on the other hand. Thus, the discourse was intended to serve for the benefit of the listener (the candidate himself) only (B6L) no matter what is said and how it is said.

The basic rituals in communicating may be defied in such discourses because whom to (dis)benefit is the primary focus. That explains why both Biden and Trump didn't want Wallace to move onto another subject. Biden repeatedly said "I got to respond to that" while Trump insisted on saying that those shut-down states were not doing well. Both candidates failed to follow the basic rituals, not to mention principles and maxims as outlined in mainstream pragmatics. None of them might be able to

show sufficient evidence for opening or shutting down, but they insisted on their views regardless of the (dis)benefits being uncertain to the hearer (the audience).

When it comes to the question of whether or not to "support either ending the filibuster or packing the court", no complete viewpoint can be obtained because the candidates began to quarrel instead of debating. Biden insisted that the American people should speak while Trump simply asked Biden questions such as "Are you going to pack the court" "Why wouldn't you answer that question" "Who is on your list". It seems that Biden became a suspect at court inquiry and Trump was the lawyer or the judge. In other words, Trump got no good answers to the question and his strategy was to stop Biden from telling the audience (the hearer) a proper answer. Biden got irritated and fought back with "Will you shut up, man?", "This is so un-Presidential.", "Keep yapping, man", etc.

The 2020 presidential debates in U.S. is abnormal in many ways, so the discourse is typical for (dis)benefiting. Benefit weighing may not be so salient in other presidential debates. For example, in the debates between Barack Obama and John McCain in 2008,[5] the rituals were followed and necessary mutual respects were maintained. However, this does not mean that benefit weighing was absent in those debates.

During one of the debates, the moderator Bob Schieffer raised the question: "Are each of you tonight willing to sit at this table and say to each other's face what your campaigns and the people in your campaigns have said about each other?" Obama's campaign used words like "erratic, out of touch, lie, angry, losing his bearings" to describe McCain while McCain's commercials used words like "disrespectful, dangerous, dishonorable, he lied" to describe Obama. McCain was the first to answer the question. He said that the campaign had been tough. The logic behind is that bad words are inevitable in tough campaigns. Then he complained of Obama's poor cooperation and lack of intervention of the tragedy at Dallas. It is clear that McCain tried to defame his opponent (the other listener) but he failed to speak for the benefits of the audience (the hearer).

By contrast, Obama's reply was strategic because he spoke for the benefits of the audience. His ultimate purpose in the debate was to win, and his speaking for the benefits of the audience may just be a kind of show. Nevertheless, he directly pointed out "the American people are less interested in our hurt feelings during the course of the campaign than addressing the issues that matter to them so deeply". As to the question of hurtful words used against the opponent, Obama used McCain's own poll results and reported that two-thirds of the people surveyed thought McCain was running a negative campaign while one-third thought Obama was so.

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5 https://debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-15-2008-debate-transcript (accessed 27 March 2023).

McCain's strategy was to fight against Obama's descriptions so that the audience may "see through" the dishonesty of the opponent. That is to say, McCain only considered his own benefit in answering this question. By contrast, Obama was speaking for the benefit of the people by saying: "there is nothing wrong with us having a vigorous debate" "I don't mind being attacked for the next three weeks". This means Obama didn't care about his own benefit (The fact was that he must care about his success in the debate) but the benefit of the American people. He continued to make it clear that the failed economic policies were something the American people couldn't afford. Obama said McCain's campaign didn't want to talk about economy but Obama himself "would love to see the next three weeks devoted to talking about the economy, devoted to talking about health care, devoted to talking about energy, and figuring out how the American people can send their kids to college". It is apparent that Obama's strategy was to talk in and for the benefit of the American people. We may imagine the effects of such debates. Obama had won the debate even if he would have lost the election. The benefit weighing here was not so salient compared with the Biden-Trump debates because a number of rituals were followed.

Politics is complicated. Candidates speak in the name of benefiting the people, but they may not be able to actualize what they said. However, candidates who do not speak for the benefit of hearers (the people) will most probably lose the debates.

Presidential debates only serve for certain generations in certain cultures with physical, metaphysical or combinational benefits. Dialogues between saints are not much confined because saints usually speak for the benefit of the human beings (B9HU). We may observe a short dialogue between Saint Augustine and Francesco Petrarch (the father of Humanism) in Example (4).

(4) S. AUGUSTINE: Well then, has poverty yet made you endure hunger and thirst and cold?
PETRARCH: No, Fortune has not yet brought me to this pass.
S. AUGUSTINE: Yet such is the hard lot of a great many people every day of their lives. Is it not?
PETRARCH: Use some other remedy than this if you can, for this brings me no relief. I am not one of those who in their own misfortunes rejoice to behold the crowd of other wretched ones who sob around them; and not seldom I mourn as much for the griefs of others as for my own.
S. AUGUSTINE: I wish no man to rejoice in witnessing the misfortunes of others, but they ought at any rate to give him some consolation, and teach him not to complain of his own lot. All the world cannot possibly occupy the first and best place. How could there be any first unless there was also a second following after? […]
(Petrarch 1840: 89–90)

When Saint Augustine asked Petrarch about his living situation, Petrarch replied that he was fortunate not to endure hunger, thirst or cold. Then Augustine said that a great many people were suffering from hunger, thirst and cold. Hearing this, Petrarch felt unhappy because the people's lives brought no relief to him. Augustine agreed and said: "I wish no man to rejoice in witnessing the misfortunes of others". The question Augustine asked is: How could there be any first unless there was also a second following after? Apparently, what Augustine said was to comfort people and he said these for the benefit of the human beings.

Similar cases may be found in churches where priests of high prestige hear people confess, or in temples where monks of high prestige speak to people who are in trouble. Sometimes, ordinary people of very good fame may also disregard their own benefits and speak and act for the benefit of other people. They speak mildly with good manners even if insulted, or they take up the cudgels against an injustice on other people.

In such cases as the above, whom to (dis)benefit is apparent in determining what to say. To obtain the benefit or to remove other people's benefit, basic rituals may not be abided by, not to mention principles, maxims or faces. In the next section, we shall consider a very subtle type of discourse in everyday life: family talk.

6 Family talk as the subtle case

"Families are created in part through talk" (Kendall 2007: 3). Ordinary cases such as family talks of different nature are typical in human life. Yet, an important issue in family talk is: whom to (dis)benefit is foregrounded when husband and wife are quarreling whereas the benefiting tendency may be quite subtle when family members are enjoying a good time. Here let's take the subtle family talk in Tannen (2007: 41) for a brief analysis.

(5) Kathy: I'm making popcorn.
You always burn it.
Sam: No I don't!
I never burn it.
I make it perfect.
(He joins Kathy in the kitchen)
You making popcorn?
In the big pot?
Kathy: Yes, but you're going to ruin it.
Sam: No I won't.
I'll get it just right.
(Tannen 2007: 41)

Tannen uses power maneuver and connection maneuver to explain this dialogue, which is illuminating. Sam (the husband) who takes care of the child tries to switch places with his wife (Kathy) so as to do the popcorn making. Kathy doesn't accept that, but her reason is that Sam is unable to do that. Thus, Kathy's impugning of Sam's competence is typically power maneuver, and her so-called consideration of benefiting the family is accomplished by the connection she frames: Sam will ruin the popcorn and she is the one who should make the popcorn. Tannen's analysis hits the nail on the head: Kathy wants to "control her own actions for her own good" (Tannen 2007: 41).

The dialogue may be understood differently from the perspective of benefit weighing. The beginning utterances in Example (5) by Kathy (i.e. "I am making popcorn" and "You always burn it") have made it clear that Kathy is claiming that what she does about popcorn is for the benefit of the family while what Sam does disbenefits the family. The question is that Kathy's claim (i.e. "You always burn it") may be either true or false. If this claim is true, Kathy disregards Sam's metaphysical benefit (e.g. self-esteem) and speaks for the benefit of herself only (B5S). If the claim about Sam is false and Kathy simply does not like taking care of the baby compared with doing cooking, then her way of speaking shows no respect for her husband. She may have called a stag a horse, with little respect to the other half. A continuity of similar talking without proper weighing of benefits will definitely lead to fight, even divorce in the end.

No meaningful talk is without benefit weighing. Talks which benefit the speaker only (B5S) occupy the majority of human communication, but few people may have noticed that. This is out of human instinct and no blame shall be laid on it. Yet, benefit for others must be properly treated if successful communication is pursued. Let's imagine a variant dialogue between the husband (Sam) and the wife (Kathy) in Example (6):

(6) Kathy: I'm making popcorn.
You may try it if you like, and I'll take care of the baby.
Sam: Ok. But I am afraid I'll make it a mess.
Can I make it in the big pot?
Kathy: Yes, but you may try the microwave oven as well.
Sam: Really? Let me read the instructions. I'll get it just right.
Kathy: To save time, follow my instructions, will you?
Sam: That's great. The first step?

In Example (6), the husband and wife are speaking with proper weighing of benefits for the other half. What Sam says implies that he is not familiar with popcorn making. Yet, Kathy considers the metaphysical benefit to Sam, i.e. his self-esteem as a man. She also considers the physical benefit to Sam, i.e. microwave oven being a better choice. In such exchange, Sam is very happy and he can't wait to make the popcorn under Kathy's instructions. He will most probably share the burden of housework later on, instead of falling into despair.

Sam in Example (6) is speaking for the benefit of Kathy as well. His words (i.e. "I am afraid I'll make it a mess" "Can I make it in the big pot?" and "I'll get it just right.") suggest that he regards Kathy as the authority. His words also tell that he is considering the benefit to the listener and the hearer (B4LH). He is not speaking for his own benefit only.

Family members live together and they are usually very familiar with one another in terms of personality and habits. Sometimes they simply want immediate solutions or response without considering whom to (dis)benefit, which is usually the origin of misunderstandings. When husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters […] stop to weigh the benefit (either physical, metaphysical or combinational) to the listener and the hearer when they speak, family happiness rather than tragedy will be considerably increased.

Since "conscious reflection distorts the semantic process: what speakers say they would say is very different from what they really do say" (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 304), people may sometimes try ways to be rid of the listener but their choice of wording does not work. For example, seeing that Sam is going to burn the popcorn, Kathy tries to ask him to take the trash out. See Example (7) from Tannen (2007: 44):

(7) Kathy: You gotta take the trash outside.
Sam: I can't, I'm doing the popcorn.
Kathy: I'll DO it,
I'll watch it.
You take the trash out and come back in a few minutes and –
Sam: Well, because it'll burn!
(Tannen 2007: 44)

What Kathy wants to say is that Sam will burn the popcorn and he should stop right now. Yet, her choice of wording is to ask Sam to take the trash outside. Kathy here takes into consideration both the benefit to the listener (Sam) and the benefit to the hearer (the child or people in the family), trying to induce Sam into giving up popcorn-making. So far at this phase, Sam seems to misunderstand Kathy's intention because he insists on making popcorn. Thus, implied meanings cannot be well-interpreted without a proper perception of the benefits. What is worse is that bad intention may be taken as benefit and good intention may be taken as disbenefit on numerous occasions. For example, people pretend to give priority to others' benefits, and such intention may be taken as good in the beginning and cheating may be revealed in the end.

Sometimes, people who give benefit are not pretending but they simply think about the reward back. "Anyone who thinks about being repaid while he is giving deserves to be cheated" (Seneca 2011: 18). The act of giving benefit should be pure in itself: joyful, youthful, virginal, and translucent (Seneca 2011).

Most of the time, people have different conceptions of benefit. Husband and wife under the same roof for many years may still conceive benefits in totally different ways. Conception of benefit varies not only in person, but also in time. Present benefit, past benefit, and future benefit all have to be considered for successful social interactions. Misconnection between the time, i.e. speaker and listener do not conceive the benefit in the same time frame, most probably results in misunderstandings too.

Now we have observed both the salient cases (presidential debates) and the subtle cases (family talk) in terms of benefit weighing. The categories can be found in other discourse as well. It is clear that whom to (dis)benefit is the determining factor in language interaction.

A more important issue is that globalization and digitalization have pushed the world into a multilingual, multicultural society where conflicts have to be reconciled and intentions have to be compromised for human civilization and survival. Intercultural communication becomes much more intense and it should be considered as "a collision of cultures" and "the main linguistic and pragmatic models must also be evaluated on their capacity to explain multilingual competence as well as multilingual language use and its traces appropriately" (Kecskes 2014: 1). Digitalised communication which tremendously drags communication into intercultural today is particularly in the need of a benefit perspective so that reconciliation and compromising may be much more available.

7 Conclusion

As is found in recent psychological studies, "People decide who might benefit or harm them and react accordingly" (Abele et al. 2021: 290). The purpose of speaking on the speaker's side is to express intentions, and on the listener or hearer's side the purpose is to interpret the intentions and give feedback when necessary. Thus, the primary task of linguistic analysis is to reconstruct connections between intention expression and interpretation. Since no intention is benefit-free, considering whom to (dis)benefit is the key to the reconstruction of such connections. Language choices may be various and even self-contradictory, depending on specific circumstances, but whom to (dis)benefit in benefit weighing is always the determining force. Benefit weighing is instinctive (e.g. the toddler Richard's reply of "mice" to her mother) and it becomes extremely complex along life. Adults may not say what they mean, or simply do not mean what they say (e.g. white lies), and it is benefit weighing that determines what they say and how they say it. Benefit may be physical, metaphysical or combinational, and benefit weighing in language interaction can be observed under the nine categories as outlined in Section 4. The best result of communication comes when the interlocutors disregard their own benefits and speak for the group, the

community, or human beings in general. Thus, the themes such as implicature, presupposition and givenness, speech acts, deixis, reference, context, etc. may all be anchored by benefit weighing.

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