

Rationality in Discourse. Universalist and Contextualized Views

Panel organized by Helmut Gruber (helmut.k.gruber@univie.ac.at) , Martin Reisigl (martin.reisigl@univie.ac.at) , Jürgen Spitzmüller (juergen.spitzmueller@univie.ac.at) during the Second International Conference on Discourse Pragmatics, held online between October, 20-22, 2023.

Since decades, rationality has been viewed as a cornerstone of linguistic-pragmatic theories of communicative action. Both in Habermas's theory of communicative action (derived, among others things, from speech act theory) and in Grice's intentionalist theory of meaning, the presupposition of rationality of conversationalists plays a central role. For Habermas (1981), rationality is "built in" into human language, as communicative action can always enter the realm of rational argumentative discourse as soon as one interlocutor questions a validity claim of a speech act another interlocutor has uttered. Conversationalists then put forward rational arguments until they reach a consensus which is based on the "unforced force" of the better argument. For Grice (1975) rationality is at the core of cooperation (and thus a foundation for his famous cooperation principle) and a pre-requisite for calculating implicatures. As both theories claim universal applicability as theories of human linguistic action, they view rationality as a universal characteristic of the human mind.

On the other hand, rationality has also been critically challenged in philosophy, anthropology, and sociolinguistics. In this context, it is construed as a "post-Enlightenment" or "Western" construct which is at best to be culturally contextualized, if not taken as an ideology that misguides how people ground their actions (for the debate, cf. Hollis & Lukes 1982; Tambiah 1990) and which bespeaks a problematic "denotationalist" approach to language (Silverstein 2014). From this perspective, rationality is not to be taken as a universal, but as a contextualized dimension, as a product rather than as a prerequisite of discourse. The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation also takes a contextualist viewpoint on issues of rationality when it assumes that any consensus that may be reached in an argumentative exchange of opinions remains context-bound and cannot be regarded as a universal agreement (e.g. Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Snoeck Henkemans 1996: 94-97). Feminist and gender theoretical perspectives also question universalistic concepts of rationality and revise them at least to the point that – according to them – a strict and binary opposition of rationality and emotionality is not tenable.

As a sort of synthesis of these opposing positions, some researchers have pointed out that rationality is also, or even primarily, a communicative resource upon which conversationalists can draw during concrete communicative events. Specific contributions (or contributors) to a conversation can be claimed to be "rational" or "irrational" at a certain point of an interaction, specific actions can be said to occur for "rational" reasons within specific contexts only. Under this participants' perspective, the question arises whether conversationalists communicate "rationally" in all situations. These first order (participants') orientations towards what counts as rational in a certain context of situation might not necessarily and always coincide with conceptions of the above mentioned second order (theorists') conceptions of universal rationality.

Such "struggles over rationality" do not only occur in local interactions. Often, they are also at the core of larger-scale discourse (or Discourse). Recent debates about "scientific arguments" (in the context of the pandemics or climate change), "alternative facts" or "counter-theories" are cases in point. Here, "rationality" transforms into a social value or commodity, a fact that is of major interest to (meta-)pragmatic inquiry (who claims to be "rational" and how?).

Our panel aims at bringing together research and researchers whose work deals with one or several of these and additional perspectives on rationality and who are interested in bringing various

perspectives together in order to exchange results and identify congruities and incongruities which might stimulate mutual intellectual fertilization and further research.

References

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Abstracts (max. 300 words including references) should be sent per e-mail to all three organizers not later than July, 15 2023. Notification of acceptance: July, 30 2023.