Paradigms gained or the art of productive misunderstanding

Barbara MOSER-MERCER.  
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Ever since interdisciplinarity made its debut in interpretation research in Venice some 14 years ago (NATO Symposium on Language, Interpretation and Communication), there has been a debate over which research community had adopted the more sophisticated and comprehensive theory of interpretation. To this day, members of one community may often not enter into a dialogue with representatives of the other, not because all the questions ever raised with regard to interpretation have already been answered, but because all too often an adamant defense of one's own theory might preclude the open-mindedness required for cross-fertilization to occur.

The interpretation research community can be broadly divided into two sub-communities, whereby affiliation is dictated by intellectual preference. The first group prefers explorations which require precision of logical processes, and where members are interested in the natural sciences and quantification; the second group prefers explorations which involve the intellect in a less logically rigorous manner, where members are interested more in a liberal arts approach and general theorizing. Since both groups are intelligent, it is not difficult for members of one group to understand what members of the other group are studying. Yet, there exists a notable communication gap between the two. Many times the natural science oriented group has attempted to propose certain concepts to the liberal arts group, only to discover with exasperation that their explanations probably sounded too abstract and abstruse, although the ideas involved usually were quite simple. Conversely, the liberal arts group has tried to convey its concepts in terms which seemed laudably lucid to them, but which to the exasperation of the natural science group seemed hopelessly vague and ambiguous.

Based on the definition that a research community consists of the practitioners of a scientific specialty, bound together by common elements in their education and apprenticeship, and who consider themselves as responsible for the pursuit of a set of shared goals, including the training of their successors, professional communication within the community should not be as arduous, give rise to so many misunderstandings and elicit such significant disagreement (Kuhn, 1977).

Perhaps, then, the issue concerns not sub-groups of one and the same scientific community, but rather two quite distinct communities sharing nothing more than the basic subject of inquiry - namely interpretation - with both communities operating within very distinct paradigms. A paradigm is what the members of a scientific community, and they alone, share. The term has been employed frequently to denote the specific intellectual preference, rules and research approach of a particular scientific community, chosen by it for their usefulness in developing a theory of the subject under study. The goal of each community is, after all, the construction of a theory that can best account for and explain the phenomenon under study. Both interpretation research communities would probably
agree on that point. Where the two part is over the notion of what a good theory should be.

Among the criteria adopted for good scientific theories, collectively the following five would appear to indicate what is at stake. First of all, a theory should be accurate; consequences deduced from a theory should be in proven agreement with the results of existing experiments and observations. Secondly, a theory should be consistent: internally with regard to its logical argument and externally with other currently accepted theories applicable to related aspects of nature. Third, a theory should be broad in scope: its consequences should extend far beyond the particular observations, it was initially designed to explain. Fourth, a theory should be simple, bringing order to phenomena that would otherwise be unstructured and confusing. Lastly, a theory should be fruitful of new research findings, it should disclose new phenomena or previously unnoted relationships among those already known. This is particularly relevant to theory choice: a researcher choosing between two theories usually knows that his decision will have a bearing on his subsequent research career. Of course he is especially attracted by a theory that promises the concrete successes for which researchers are ordinarily rewarded. (Kuhn, 1977).

Proceeding on my a priori assumption that both interpretation research communities strive to develop a solid theory of interpretation, it is interesting to examine which of the above criteria have been given priority by each community. Accuracy, which usually denotes quantitative agreement, is particularly decisive in theory formation, since it is necessary for a theory's predictive and explanatory powers. Within the liberal arts paradigm, accuracy is seldom considered, whereas it ranks high with the natural science community. Consistency and simplicity, in turn, are the hallmarks of the liberal arts approach. As a consequence, this approach has had a considerable influence on pedagogy, the natural science community seems to be still so overwhelmed by the complexity of the interpreting process that the idea of developing a simple model is rejected almost right away. With regard to scope, no one community has yet made any particular claims, for quite obvious reasons: both are still borrowing, sometimes heavily, from other related fields and cannot as yet foresee extending their own conclusions to neighboring fields. We should not confuse this definition of scope with some efforts in the late sixties and early seventies whereby psychologists and psycholinguists used interpretation as an experimental condition to explain certain phenomena of language comprehension in general (Treismann, 1965a, Goldman-Eisler, 1972, Oléron and Nanpon, 1964, and more recently Dillinger, 1989). Scientists chose not just on the basis of one but of several criteria; subjective factors and individual criteria play an important role as well, despite the fact that subjectivity is obviously not a desiderata in any scientific endeavour. But as Frey (1970) points out, science is never purely scientific in the narrow sense of the term, in that it would accept and rely only on verifiable and provable statements. "We can thus justifiably claim that each specialty has ... (also) metaphysical components". (Frey, 1970, p. 113). Intuition, observation and discovery of relationships constitute acceptable procedures for developing hypotheses and theories. But these theses are scientifically tenable only if they are verifiable and when they are verified. Intuition and observation in themselves do not constitute methods of scientific justification.

With this overview of the areas of real and potential disagreement between the two interpretation research communities, it may be helpful to evaluate the stage of theory formation each one has reached. The liberal arts community which is best represented by the works of the Paris school (Seleskovitch, 1975, Lederer, 1981, Seleskovitch and Lederer, 1989, et al.; a rather similar approach has recently been proposed by Vermeer, 1984) considers itself as being at a rather well developed stage of theory formation. The theory's general consistency (although there do exist certain internal and external inconsistencies, see Gile 1990c), its comprehensiveness and simplicity, its intuitive explanatory value and consequent appeal to pedagogy have all combined to give it widespread acceptance. Thus, in many ways, this theory meets many of the demands placed on theories in general. There have been only a few attempts at verifying the theory, partly because it does not lend itself readily to verification. Returning to our notion of paradigm, this community has an accepted
paradigm. Researchers working within it consider it sufficient to adopt the existing theory, whereas a logical consequence would be for those attracted to this paradigm to consider it as a lightly held tentative hypothesis, test their observational data against it and either accept or reject all or part of it. As yet there is no indication, however, that the liberal arts community is ready to accept such an approach.

The natural science community presents a somewhat more heterogeneous picture, but most members would agree that the approaches adopted by Barik, 1969, Pinter, 1969 and Gerver, 1976 and continued by Moser, 1978, Stenzl, 1983, Lambert, 1985, Mackintosh, 1985, Gile, 1985, Gran and Fabbro, 1988, (to name but a few) would all qualify under the same natural science paradigm. While some members of this community, in analogy to the liberal arts group, have attempted to develop models of the interpretation process that would later be encompassed by a more comprehensive theory, others have selected very specific aspects of interpretation and designed experimental studies around them. Common to all members of this community is the quest for an accurate and verifiable, albeit not necessarily simple theory of interpretation, one with a high degree of explanatory power which would objectively describe the act of interpretation while at the same time fulfilling the stringent criteria of scientific inquiry. This community is much further removed from an all-embracing theory than the liberal arts group is; from a developmental perspective it is still at the beginning of the theory-construction stage, where hypotheses are being proposed, tested and often rejected. Such rigorous testing will eventually bring this community within reach of an accurate and verifiable theory (Dodds, 1989). This theory will probably still have to rely for some of its components on intuitive assumptions, but will largely be the result of an abstraction from a large number of observations. The patterns thus obtained should then be encountered in similar form by other researchers engaged in experimentation. Thus the paradigm will have evolved into a verifiable theory of interpretation. This is not a result to be achieved in the lifetime of one researcher; from the very beginning the natural science community placed considerable emphasis on interdisciplinarity (the recent flourishing of research activity at the Trieste School is an excellent example of interdisciplinarity stimulating scientific inquiry). But despite the lack of an explicitly stated and consistent paradigm this community is actively engaged in theory construction.

Considerable work is required, both theoretical and experimental, before any new theory can display sufficient accuracy and scope to generate widespread conviction. In short, it has to be tested over time, even by researchers working within a rival paradigm. Such a mode of development, however, requires a decision process which permits researchers to disagree. If all scientists were conforming in their views, all would make the same decisions at the same time (Kuhn, 1977). It is doubtful whether science would survive. The blow for interpretation research would be devastating. After all, much of it feeds on the fundamental tension between the two research communities, a point often overlooked by advocates of either paradigm.

Thus, disagreement is essential and productive, but both communities should steer clear of the danger so aptly described by Chomsky (1977, p. 82): "There is no place for any a priori doctrine (emphasis is mine) concerning the complexity of the brain or its uniformity as far as the higher mental functions are concerned".

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