Greek Tragedy as Impolite Conversation:  
Towards a Practice Approach in Linguistic Theory

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Introduction

Linguistic theorizing may yet profit from recent developments in the social sciences. With the formulation of truth-conditional semantics and Gricean implicature theory in the 1970s, a convenient division of labor between semantics and pragmatics was established that, despite numerous elaborations and criticisms, has proved remarkably resilient and enduring. Even the more recent theoretical developments have for the most part not fundamentally challenged the underlying methodological assumptions that associate semantics with conventions and rules, and pragmatics with intentions and strategies. This opposition closely mirrors the familiar social-scientific opposition between structure and agency. The latter, however, has nowadays largely been transcended with the emergence of a variety of approaches usually referred to as ’practice theory’. Below, I would like to argue for two general claims:

1. In linguistic theory, as in the social sciences, there is room for a notion of practice that is not logically posterior or methodologically secondary to either structure or agency, but, on the contrary, may be constitutive of both;
2. Moreover, linguistic practices need not be, or at least not entirely be, cooperative.

In sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, practice-oriented concepts have already acquired a respectable status as theoretically and empirically useful, but they have not yet gained currency in what is usually called theoretical or core linguistics. My claim here is that, notably, the fields of semantics and pragmatics may gain by a more systematic incorporation of a practice dimension. I hope to illustrate this (admittedly preliminary) general argument with a criticism of, in particular, Gricean and neo-Gricean pragmatics, and with examples from classical Greek tragedy, a speech genre which reflects a linguistic practice and metalinguistic awareness that differ significantly from what contemporary theorizing would lead us to expect.

1. Semantics-pragmatics as structure-agency

In the 1970s and 1980s, a classical, or ideal-typical, division of labor crystallized between semantics as the domain of rules, conventions and literal language (or of propositional or sentential meaning), and pragmatics as the domain of strategies, intentions, and individually conveyed speaker’s meanings. This strict opposition has more recently met with criticism from various sides, but despite such more recent developments, the methodological assumptions underlying this division have not seriously been questioned. These are:
1. methodological individualism;
2. a quasi-structuralist opposition between individual language behavior and the language system;
3. a consensus view of communication.

Methodological individualism, which implies treating language users as autonomous, conscious, and rational agents, is an assumption so widespread and uncontroversial in linguistic theory that it is rarely if ever discussed (for an exception, see Searle 1995: 25). It shows not only in the Gricean emphasis on speaker’s strategies and intentions, but also in cognitive approaches in linguistics, which explain linguistic phenomena in terms of individual, internal, and indeed private cognitive processes.

Secondly, current views of the semantics-pragmatics interface tend to reproduce the familiar social-scientific distinction between structure and agency. For a number of years, social scientists debated whether social action was determined by structural factors outside the individual actor’s control or even consciousness, such as economic class, or rather by conscious, intentional action on the actor’s part. Marx and Durkheim, despite their obvious differences, are both representative of a structure-oriented approach; the most famous statement of an agency-oriented view is, of course, Max Weber’s brand of interpretive sociology, which explains social action in terms of ‘subjective meanings’ internal to the individual actor. In linguistics, a closely parallel distinction can be seen in the structuralist oppositions between *langue* and *parole*, and between competence and performance. Whether we take, with Saussure, *langue* as a social fact or norm outside the individual speaker, or, with Chomsky, competence as involving unconscious rules, the syntactic and semantic core domain of structural linguistics is treated as independent from the individual language user’s consciousness and intentions. By contrast, *parole* as the individual application of — and deviation from — this social norm, and performance as the imperfect realization of competence, are delegated to the domain of individual and intentional linguistic action, i.e., prototypically, pragmatics.

Finally, most contemporary approaches to language and language use are informed by an implicit view, or ideology, of language as a kind of social contract, consisting of a set of shared rules the speakers have tacitly agreed upon for their own individual and mutual benefit (for more detailed discussion and criticism, cf. Leezenberg 2002: 900-1). The ideology of language as a social contract is not simply a variety of methodological individualism: it crucially implies a consensus view of linguistic communication as geared towards reproducing social stability and integration. In social theory, the arch father of such a consensus view is Durkheim, who is explicitly acknowledged as providing the framework of Brown & Levinson’s (1987) analysis of linguistic politeness. Conflict views, like those of Marx and Foucault, have yet to find their match in linguistic theory.

More recent approaches in linguistics may question the strict opposition between semantics and pragmatics, or dispute the borderline between them; but they do not seriously challenge these three deeper assumptions. On the one hand, descriptively more powerful forms of semantics like Discourse Representation Theory and Dynamic Semantics, involve enriched semantic representation languages, and thus encroach upon territory earlier considered pragmatic. On the other hand, neo-Gricean

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1 I ignore here Lewis’s (1969) argument against taking linguistic conventions as a kind of social contract in a more specific, technical sense.
forms of pragmatics argue that essentially pragmatic forms of inferencing processes are logically prior to the determination of truth-conditional or propositional content. Neither position, however, marks a radical methodological departure from the classical distinction between semantic structure and pragmatic agency. Recent game-theoretical approaches to semantics (e.g., Dekker & Van Rooy 2000), which are ultimately inspired by Lewis (1969), promise to break down the strict distinction between convention and intention; but with their focus on communicative strategies, they still presuppose a notion of conscious, rational, and autonomous individual agency. Optimality-theoretical semantics (e.g. Blutner 2000), by contrast, inspired as it is by connectionist models of computation, threatens to dissolve the notion of agency altogether. Cognitive or conceptualist approaches in linguistic theory like, most famously, Lakoff & Johnson’s Cognitive Semantics, are ambivalent about the role of both agency and sociocultural factors. On the one hand, as argued by Hanks (1993: 142-3), they seem to allow for an active role on the language user’s part in constructing meanings; but on the other, they tend to a quasi-naturalist reduction of linguistic matters to purely individual, indeed private, cognitive or psychological processes. On both accounts, however, they appear to leave insufficient room for the social as the domain of public practice, which may involve cooperation as well as conflict, negotiation and contest, and power relations that may or may not be perceived as legitimate.

An innovation of sorts is Clark’s recent (1996) argument that language use is a form of joint action by people acting in coordination, which tries to integrate the cognitive and social aspects of language use. Clark’s views are inspired in part by Lewis’s (1969) game-theoretical analysis of linguistic convention as arising as the solution to a coordination problem. As such, they still presume individual (i.e., rational and autonomous) agency; and although Clark does allow (1996: 31) in principle for variations in the degree of cooperativeness and what he calls ’governance’ (i.e., the presence or absence of a power asymmetry), in practice he devotes almost all his attention to cooperative and egalitarian language activities. Power, however, in communication as elsewhere, need not be legitimate but may be contested, arrogated and fought over; on the other hand, power is not necessarily a purely negative force that distorts ‘genuine’ (i.e., cooperative and egalitarian) communication: it may in fact be productive of meanings (cf. Leezenberg 2002).

The consequences of the above-mentioned assumptions appear perhaps most explicitly in Gricean pragmatics and its offshoots. As is well known, Grice’s Cooperative Principle (CP) states:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1989: 26)

As known, this principle does not claim that language users are in fact always cooperative, but rather that - other things being equal — they interpret each other’s utterances as if they were. Most modestly, this principle merely captures an allegedly neutral or normal way of speaking. Even in such terms, the presumption that there is such a thing as a stylistically or socially neutral form of conversation, which is then characterized in the decidedly non-neutral terms of cooperativeness, politeness, and equality among the participants, runs into trouble. In many Gricean-inspired approaches, however, an overarching principle of cooperation becomes something
much more momentous: it is no longer seen as merely a guiding principle governing the interpretation of polite exchanges of information, but as something of a necessity of nature: in Relevance Theory, something closely resembling the Cooperative Principle is promoted to the quasi-naturalistic status of a general empirical principle of human cognition; and there have recently been calls to turn the Principle into a central notion for logical semantics, that is, into a logical or a priori principle (Groenendijk 1999). Such moves mask the fact that this principle is by no means necessarily as universally present in communication as is often assumed.

Clearly, the Cooperative Principle has proved a rich and successful tool in linguistic theorizing. Yet, there are various kinds of linguistic interaction that do not conform to it. In various kinds of conflictual, authoritarian, or impolite communication, such as police interrogations, street brawls, and the exchange of insults, the conversational participants obviously do not and cannot simply assume the other’s cooperativeness, sincerity or respectability. Either the participants simply are not cooperating, or they have to be forced to cooperate with the threat of various sanctions. In so far as these cases are treated as involving a simple failure to live up to an otherwise ever-present and ever-assumed Cooperative Principle, they are automatically reduced to a theoretically secondary status as abnormal, imperfect forms of communication. It may be worthwhile, however, to look at the consequences of giving up the methodological assumption that communication is normally, or essentially, cooperative.

2. Towards a practice account: Linguistic habitus

In the social sciences, the apparently inevitable opposition between structure and agency has been broken in an interesting way with the emergence of so-called practice approaches to social action, a wide spectrum of approaches that take practices not only as transcending both macrosocial structure and individual conscious agency, but as (partly) constitutive of both (cf. Schatzki a.o. (eds.) 2001 for an overview). Such practice-based approaches emphasize that social action (including linguistic communication) is often not wholly intentional or goal-directed, but not wholly reducible to conventionalized rules or structures either.

In the social sciences, the fruitfulness of this ‘practice turn’ has been widely, though not universally, acknowledged. In linguistic theory, however, the potential fruitfulness of a practice approach has not yet been realized. There are some early precursors (notably, of course, authors like Austin and Wittgenstein), but the more radical implications of a practice turn have not yet been gauged. Among these implications are the idea that langue is not strictly prior to or independent from parole; that speakers and their intentions (that is, as fully conscious, responsible, and autonomous actors) need constitute a kind of rock bottom in the explanation of utterances, and — perhaps most importantly — that linguistic communication need not be wholly cooperative.

My central claim is methodological in character: I would like to argue for the descriptive and explanatory advantages a reorientation towards practice may bring; but obviously, I can no more here than scratch the surface of this vast topic. Specifically, a more practice-oriented approach to language and linguistic communication may profit from Bourdieu’s influential notion of habitus, construed as the prime force that drives social action. According to Bourdieu, much of our

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2 Here, I am not concerned with the specifics of Bourdieu’s sociological research on language (for which see Bourdieu 1991). For the sake of brevity, I also omit discussion of his highly relevant
everyday social actions is driven by our habitus, i.e., by a set of internalized and at most semi-conscious and semi-intentional dispositions to behave in certain ways rather than others. These dispositions typically reflect, but are by no means mechanically determined by, social or structural factors, such as age, gender, and social class. Nor can habitus be reduced, Bourdieu argues, either to conscious, intentional planning and decision making (i.e., ‘agency’) or to social or structural factors that are external to the individual actor’s consciousness (i.e., ‘structure’).

For an example, consider Western European table manners. These require that one hold one’s fork in one’s left hand and one’s knife in one’s right hand, and that one hold them in one specific way rather than another. Holding one’s fork in one’s right hand or leaning with one’s elbow on the table are frowned upon, although they may be more tolerated from young children. Moreover, table manners are clearly linked to social status: for example, in the Netherlands, mashing one’s food (apparently practiced by some 50% of the population) is widely considered a vulgar, i.e., lower-class and uneducated, way of eating. Thus, table manners may be considered an example of habitus as expected ways of behaving; they are clearly not innate but acquired, but at the same time, they are mostly not conscious or deliberate forms of action. For the most part, people will automatically or unthinkingly eat, without any further social aims in mind. Yet, according to Bourdieu, habitus factors may play a role in the reproduction of social inequality. Thus, students of lower-class background may meet invisible obstructions to their upward social movement, when they do not command the expected eating habits of the educated classes.

Some prominent authors in linguistic theory have noted the potential usefulness of linguistic habitus as generating a near-automatic, expected way of behavior. Thus, Searle (1995: 132) acknowledges that his own notion of the Background, which he considers, among others, to be constitutive of literal meaning, bears some resemblance to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus; but he does not spell out the implications of this resemblance. Likewise, Levinson (2000: xiii, 386) has noted that the notion of a ‘preferred interpretation’, which is central to his theory of generalized conversational implicature, may bear some resemblance to that of habitus. The introduction of a linguistic correlate to the notion of habitus does not, however, simply amount to the addition of a level of ‘preferred interpretation’ in between wholly conventional semantic meaning and wholly intention-driven conversational implicature. It calls for a more radical revision of the very opposition between structure and agency, and of its linguistic homologues like convention and intention, competence and performance, langue and parole, and even synchrony and diachrony. A practice-oriented account along such lines would not only incorporate expected ways of behaving that are not wholly conscious or driven by intentions or strategic calculations, but also provide more room for conflict in communication. Most importantly perhaps, it would involve an explication of power relations in social action, and thus promises a methodological alternative to the near-ubiquitous picture of linguistic communication as a wholly cooperative exchange between wholly rational and autonomous agents. Like Grice’s Cooperative Principle, habitus can be transgressed or violated without any sense of logical contradiction; but unlike the Cooperative Principle, habitus is not presumed to be socially neutral. Closer attention to linguistic habitus would

notions of symbolic power as constituting the everyday social world through language use (1991: 170) and symbolic violence as, among other things, delegating local vernacular varieties of language to a subordinate and ‘sub-standard’ status (1991: 51-2).

3 Cf. the searching, and still somewhat hesitant, observations in Hanks (1993).
emphasize the semi-automatic and expected — but by no means neutral — ways of using specific varieties of language in specific settings; it would also emphasize that the apparently cooperative character of linguistic communication may serve as a mask, and indeed a precondition, for the reproduction of social inequality (cf. esp. Bourdieu 1991: ch. 1). Thus, a practice turn in linguistic theory might help in explicating the limitations of both methodological individualism and a social-contract view of language.

3. Greek tragedy and linguistic action

Precisely how a practice approach could materialize in linguistic theory is a question that goes far beyond the scope of this paper; here, I can do no more than hint at some of the descriptive and conceptual gains that a practice turn might yield. As a first step, I would like to illustrate these claims with some examples taken from Greek tragedy, which not only features prototypically conflictual kinds of communication, but also betrays a remarkably rich and complex metalinguistic awareness. Most significantly, tragic characters do not generically presume that their conversation partners are sincere, to the point, rational, or even worth listening to; that is, they neither follow nor even assume the Cooperative Principle. This is, of course, significantly at odds with the central tenet of Gricean and neo-Gricean pragmatics. Further, the protagonists’ concern with matters of honor and the numerous curses and blessings that occur in tragedy betray an awareness that language may be partly constitutive of (social) realities. Moreover, these metalinguistic beliefs inform the way the participants use their own language, and interpret that of others. In other words, we may see the complex interaction between language structure and meanings, linguistic practices, and metalinguistic beliefs or ideologies (cf. Hanks 1996: 230-4). Finally, there are clear indications that utterances are driven by a socially instilled habitus rather than by fully conscious deliberation, and that speaker’s intentions have little control over linguistic action. For simplicity’s sake, I restrict myself to the plays of Sophocles, assuming they express more or less coherent views on the character and use of language. No sweeping conclusions about the ancient Greek worldview, or even about classical Athenian thought, are implied.

a. Cooperation and conflict

The conflictual character of tragic communication poses challenges not only to the common view of polite linguistic behavior as characterized by e.g. Brown & Levinson (1987), but also casts doubts on the very framework within which their theory is set up. Not only is the Gricean Cooperative Principle routinely violated or ignored; it is demonstrably not even presumed as guiding the interpretation of others’ utterances.

4 The recent debate on hate speech, notably Butler (1997), reveals some important parallels to curses, but this debate has mostly been taken up in juridical and political discussions, rather than in linguistic theorizing.

5 Here, my wish is merely to argue that they interact, not how; I will also refrain from speculation about their relative logical priority.

6 Some readers may object to the use of examples from such an artificial, indeed fictional, speech genre, but this artificiality is no bigger than that of the The cat is on the mat-style sample sentences often presented in writings on linguistic theory and philosophy of language. Moreover, the assumption of a clear dichotomy between fictional and non-fictional language not only turns out to be surprisingly difficult to make, but also precludes discussion of the very questions at stake, notably the problematic of who has, or can arrogate, the power to carry out felicitous speech acts (cf. Leezenberg 2002: 902).
Tragic protagonists repeatedly refuse to engage in conversation, and when they do, they often dispute their conversation partner’s sincerity, respectability, and even good sense.7 Thus, in Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone and Theseus have to use all their persuasive abilities to secure Polyneices a conversation with his father Oedipus; Polyneices himself has to claim the special status of a suppliant and hence, special divine authorization to be listened to. And when he finally addresses his father, the latter at first simply refuses to answer:

(1) ti sigais; phneson, pater, ti: m m’apostrapeis. (1271-2)
Why are you silent? Say something, father; do not turn away from me.8

This refusal to listen resembles the refusal to speak, described by Grice (1989: 30) as ‘opting out’ of the Cooperative Principle, but it does not appear as merely the passing suspension of a principle otherwise tacitly adhered to. Moreover, when tragic characters do talk to each other, they explicitly doubt or contest their interlocutors’ cooperativeness. In the Oedipus Tyrannus, king Oedipus openly accuses his brother-in-law Creon and the seer Teiresias of lying, and refuses to accept their utterances as cooperative and sincere. In the Antigone, the ruler Creon disputes the honesty of both the guard who watches over Polyneices’s corpse, and of the prophet Teiresias who tells him of the divine displeasure at his actions. And in the Ajax, Agamemnon insults Ajax’s stepbrother Teucer, whose mother is Trojan, by saying that he literally does not understand his words:

(2) sou gar legontos ouket’ an mathoim’ eg: in barbarous gar glsson ouk epa . (1262-3)
I could not understand you if you were the speaker, as I do not know the barbarian language.

(Teucer, of course, has been speaking classical Greek all along). There are numerous other examples of such non-cooperative dialogue in Sophocles. They suggest that cooperative, let alone polite, linguistic behavior cannot simply be taken for granted as an underlying or presumed norm of communication; hence, that uncooperative utterances cannot be treated as mere deviations from, or exploitations of, such a norm.

b. Habitus
There are numerous indications that tragic utterances are driven by something like a linguistic habitus, that is, by an expected way of speaking and acting that is differentiated according to age, gender, and social status, rather than by the conscious deliberation of an autonomous and rational speaker. One cannot speak here of any neutral or ‘normal’ form of conversation that is violated or exploited, but rather of a socially constituted and differentiated power to speak in specific ways, a power which moreover is always open to negotiation and challenge. In Oedipus at Colonus, the aged Oedipus tells his daughter Antigone:

7 Here, I leave aside the problems arising from restricting conversation to the mere exchange of information.
8 Translations are based on Jebb’s classical commentary and on Lloyd-Jones’s recent Loeb edition, although I have repeatedly supplied translations of my own.
Brief speech suffices for young maidens.

His words suggest that young females are not normally expected to speak up, let alone at length. Shortly afterwards, Antigone treats her father to a remarkably lengthy speech, which, significantly, she starts with the plea

(4) pater, pithou moi, kei nea paraines  
Father, let yourself be persuaded by me, even if I am young who give advice

She thus indicates that youngsters can by no means assume that their parents (or elderly people in general) will take their words seriously. Similar situations occur, often with more tragic results: in the Antigone, Creon refuses to heed the advice of his son Haemon not to let Polyneices’s corpse lie unburied, refusing to be instructed by someone younger (726-7). In Trachiniae (1114ff.), Hyllus only with some difficulty persuades his dying father Heracles to listen to him. And in the Electra, Clytaemnestra simply ignores her daughter Electra’s reproaches about the killing of Agamemnon, instead just retorting with

(7) hs ho tade porn  
oloit' ei moi themis tad' audn.  
May the doer perish, if it is fit for me to speak this word.

The conditional addition here implies that they do not automatically assume they have the right to challenge those in power. In short, tragic speakers appear to be driven by something like a habitus which often is implicitly assumed, but which can easily be violated or challenged. Moreover, the language such habitus produce cannot be seen as socially or conversationally neutral: it
reflects existing asymmetries in power, social status, age, and gender, which may at all
times be challenged as unjust or illegitimate.

c. The power of words
Unsurprisingly, tragic characters betray no belief in language as a structured or
systematic set of conventions: they speak of words and speaking, rather than of
language. Words are typically opposed to actions: idle talk is recurrently opposed to
true, noble deeds; but there is also a clear belief that words (or as we would say,
utterances of words) may themselves count as actions that may change the world.
Oedipus complains that a small word from his sons could have prevented him from
being banished from his native city (Oedipus at Colonus, 443). That is, a single
(performative) utterance from those in power may be decisive for someone’s juridical
and social status.
Even mentioning the very name of an individual or action is seen as potentially having
serious consequences. For fear of conjuring them up, many speakers avoid using the
very name of the Erinyes or wrath goddesses; instead, they are often euphemistically
referred to as the Eumenides (‘Kindly Ones’) or simply described as

(8) τνδ’ αμαίμακετν κόρν, ἔχας τρεμομένη λέγειν. (Oed. Col. 127-8)
The invincible maidens, whose name we tremble to speak

Words are also perceived as weapons that may hurt, or even kill. When the chorus of
elders from Colonus asks Oedipus about his murderous and incestuous past, he
answers:

(9) θανατός μεν ταδ’ ακούειν. (529)
It is death to hear such things.

That is, he considers the very mention of his past a grave attack on his social persona.
More in general, the numerous insults flying back and forth in tragic disputes are but
so many assaults on, or challenges to, the opponent’s honor and respectability.
Clearly, words are seen as important weapons with which to attack, or protect,
people’s social respectability, face, or honor. This is an important point to keep in
mind when looking at the speech act of the curse (and, to a lesser extent, the blessing)
which occurs so frequently in tragedy. King Oedipus unwittingly curses himself when
he announces the horrendous punishment for the then unknown murderer or
murderers of his father Laius (236ff.); in doing so, he assigns to himself the lowliest
position of someone worse than a common criminal. Later, at Colonus, he violently
curses his sons Eteocles and Polyneices, thus preventing both from achieving victory
in battle and acquiring the Theban throne, and restating, or reproducing, the divine
doom that rests upon his house.
Such cases should not, as is often done, be taken as expressing a primitive belief in the
magical power of words to influence nature, that is, as indicating a confusion of the
human or social, the natural and the divine or supernatural spheres. First, it is not
quite correct to say that these spheres are not, or not yet, crystallized in tragic
thought: it is more appropriate to say that part of the force of tragedy lies precisely in
the problematization of, and the ambiguous status of, such apparently strict
distinctions. Second, and most importantly, many tragic characters reflect a clear
metalinguistic awareness of what Bourdieu (1991: 170) has called the ‘social magic’ of 
performative language, i.e., the fact that the mere utterance of words may bring about 
the social reality or fact they represent (cf. Searle 1995: 45). That is, language is seen 
here as a weapon to change the world, rather than as a contract to regulate it.

Curses and blessings are among the most potent ways of affecting someone’s face, or 
honor. When capturing Oedipus at Colonus, Creon suggests that he does so in defence 
of his honor, and that he would not have resorted to force, had his honor not been 
challenged:

(10) kai taut’ an ouk eprasson, ei m moi pikras  
auti t’aras rato kai tomi genei. (951-2) 
I would not have done so, had he not called down bitter curses on me and my race.

His own action (which defies the Athenian laws), in turn, is felt to be an insult to the 
honor of the Athenians and their king Theseus.

Words are especially dangerous weapons because they cannot easily be controlled by 
humans. Tragic protagonists do not specify whether the power of words lies in the 
words themselves, in the speakers uttering them, or in the divinities sanctioning them; 
indeed, tragedy systematically exploits the ambiguities between the different 
authorities involved in the use of language, and the lack of control that human agents 
have over their own and others’ words. Thus, one important restriction on the 
autonomy, and hence on the responsibility, of the individual speaker, occurs when he 
utters his words in anger (thumos). This *thumos* is seen as a partly external force, 
which leaves a human being not in control of himself. Thus, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, 
the Athenian king Theseus observes:

(11) pollai d’apeilai polla d maτh ep  
thumi katpeilesan: all’ho nous hotan  
hatou genτai, phrouda tapeilmata. (658-60) 
Many threats have taken the form of angry but vain words; but when the mind is in 
control of itself once more, the threats are gone.9

Not only is the claim that someone else’s words are governed by anger a prime way of 
indicating that his remarks should not be taken seriously; Oedipus even claims that 
some of his own earlier words were driven by *thumos* and should not have been 
listened to, especially when he said he wanted to be banished from the Theban lands 
(*Oedipus at Colonus*, 434-41; 765-71). The supreme irony here, of course, is the 
question of how many of his violent utterances in the play, notably his imprecations 
against Creon and Polyneices, are driven by anger rather than reason; and even the 
question of whether words uttered in anger may nonetheless be serious and effective. 
It would obviously go too far to see in the concept of *thumos* a precursor of habitus; 
but the implications of both, among others that language use need not be wholly 
driven or controlled by fully conscious and responsible speaker’s agency, are 
intriguingly similar.

Likewise, Athena punishes Ajax for claiming that he needs no divine assistance when 
attacking Troy (*Ajax*, 748-83). Even though his statement may well be factually true, 
the goddess takes it as a serious offence. In short, tragic speakers are not fully in

9 According to some commentators, this passage is a later interpolation, but it fits in well with 
Oedipus’s own statements.
control of their own utterances, and it may be not simply problematic but positively dangerous to claim full sovereignty over and responsibility for one’s deeds and words.10

4. Conclusion

I hope that this all too brief discussion of some of the linguistic and metalinguistic aspects of Sophoclean tragedy has made it plausible that there are significant areas of linguistic communication that cannot simply be assumed to involve cooperative, consensual, and polite behavior. The tragic characters’ language ideologies, or metalinguistic beliefs, show that they not only do not conform to the demands of Gricean pragmatics, but do not even assume that others will conform to them. Instead, they betray an awareness of the social efficacy and possibly conflictual character of language; likewise, the perceived relative independence of tragic speech from autonomous speaker’s agency and capacity for challenge and conflict suggests the potential of a more practice-oriented account informed by a notion of linguistic habitus.

The methodological implications of this should be clear by now: first, a focus on practices problematizes the strict opposition between semantics as the domain of rules and conventions (or of literal, propositional meanings) and pragmatics as the domain of intentions and strategies (or of figurative, speaker’s meanings); second, it exposes the limitations of an uncritical assumption of autonomous and rational agency and of methodological individualism; third, it questions the universal validity of the often assumed social contract view of language and the associated consensus view of communication; fourth, it calls for a more systematic attention to the articulation of various forms of power in language use; and finally, it calls attention to the interaction between language structure, linguistic practice, and metalinguistic beliefs. In these and other ways, a systematic account of linguistic practice carries the promise of descriptively enriching linguistic theory, and of integrating the social and the cognitive aspects of language use.

Literature


10 This linguistic point resembles Vernant’s (1981) famous argument that Greek tragedy does not involve a notion of sovereign, autonomous actors, or of legal subjects fully responsible for their own actions, which is directed especially against the widespread belief that the actions of tragic characters have a ‘double motivation’, i.e., that they are driven both by the human will and by divine intervention.