

Saggi e studi

Applied Psycholinguistics

Positive effects
and ethical perspectives

Vol. 1

Edited by Giuseppe Mininni
and Amelia Manuti

FrancoAngeli

PSICOLOGIA

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In memoriam of the ISAPL founder



We have believed and firmly hoped to host Tatiana Slama-Cazacu since the last three days before the opening of the IX Isapl Congress, whose selected proceedings are here published. She nourished such trust in many ways, but she finally explained that her health conditions wouldn't have allowed her to move, despite all the support we surely would have supplied her. Nonetheless, we know that she would have been happy in Bari, as she was the five times she visited Bari during the last quarter of century. During the congress we constantly perceived her presence thanks to her daily phone and email contacts. The Bari scientific committee was very happy to receive her congratulations and compliments for the organization abilities shown.

By dedicating these volumes to Tatiana Slama-Cazacu we all feel touched not only for the suspended joy for the missed rendez-vous with her, but most of all for the acute sorrow which has struck the Isapl friends when receiving the sad news of her death on the 6th of April 2011.

Giuseppe Mininni & Amelia Manuti

In the beginning was the context

by Giuseppe Mininni

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As most of you already know, ISAPL was founded in 1982 by Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, who has been its soul till now. In all these years we have had the opportunity to deal with the mythical multi-circular layout that illustrates the theoretical model (known as the “Dynamic-Contextual Approach”) proposed by the eminent Romanian scholar and humanist. The main coordinates of this model have not only guided my personal research pathway, but have also shaped the whole sense of this opening speech of our Congress. Thus, since now I am going to trace the “global context” of our meeting starting from its space-time coordinates. The first topic which should be touched on today is the physical environment and cultural setting of our meeting.

I am really glad and honoured to welcome everyone here, to the University of Bari which (after Naples and Palermo) is one of the largest institutions providing academic education in Southern Italy. In 10 years time we shall celebrate first century of Bari University and I sincerely wish that our Congress may be quoted in the history of the academic life as one of the most fruitful and successful events. Really, our University plays a leading role within the network of the Mediterranean Universities, since it embodies the traditional function of bridging the West and the East which “the land of Otranto” used to play through according to a millenary history. From this perspective, we must be widely aware of the fact that the economic exchanges and the political integrations among different communities are basically prompted by the rise and development of a particular sensitivity and of an attitude which encourage intercultural communication. The promotion and support that our Congress has received from the University of Bari and the Regione Puglia is attuned to their unique mission, that is to be protagonists within and in favour of the Mediterranean civilization. The latter can be conceived not only as a physical space, but also as a spiritual attitude defined by the mobility in borderlands, by the search for the encounter and the passion for alterity. Our remarks on the “positive, ethical effects of psycholinguistic research today” could not find a more appropriate target context since the scholars and researchers’ community working at the University of Bari has undertaken a commitment to give visibility and impulse to the “meridian” thought as conceptualized by one of its most notable sociologists.

1. Personal metaphors

The reasons to be such emotionally involved in ISAPL are intimately related to the metaphor of birth, that is an event which stands out for its strong power of transformation. Actually, my daughter Alba and ISAPL were born in the same year: 1982. Encouraged by Tatiana Slama-Cazacu and by Renzo Titone, I was in Milan just when ISAPL was coming into being and on that occasion I brought and shared my excitement for the birth of my daughter. This coincidence has taken on a certain symbolic value. This is why in these last 28 years I have been following ISAPL's development with such great affection and attention typical of a father who endeavours to his child's growth. The birth metaphor actually describes both my academic life and my belonging to the history of ISAPL as a kind of transformation from "a new born Isapl-man" to an "old Isapl-man". Really our Congress is on the wake of Julie's birth. She is my daughter's daughter that the last two months has led me to think of myself as a grand-father. But the association of ISAPL and my experience is not only a personal story. Perhaps it concerns the nature of the possible research in the field of applied psycholinguistics which contributes to change the scholars' identity.

The encounter between the psychologist's and the linguist's interests gives us the chance to "study the word" and be passionately fond of its sense. The term "applied" takes from its etymon the idea that both "something is put into practical use or into a position to serve its purpose" and "someone gives all his energy and attention to something". In our case, what is known as "basic" or "pure" psycholinguistic research provides us with some knowledge which is "adapted" and conformed to the specific requests of a real context dealing with the use of language. Indeed, application is not only an act of "operational carrying out" because it soon changes into "care, concentration, devotion". In this second meaning, "applied" psycholinguistics is actually "careful, concentrated, devoted" to a particular horizon which makes us understand the relation between what people mean and say. The "applied" nature of our "science" already prompts us to trust the assumption that our research can really help to improve the world in which we live. All human cultural activities --from daily practices to scientific procedures, from economic transactions to political assets, from religion to literature-- are carried out through language and, thus, the sense of human existence as a specific "life form" on the earth is shaped in a discursive way.

2. ISAPL's specificities: cooperation, inter-connection and openness

Since its birth, ISAPL has played a unique role, that is to promote the encounter and the mutual knowledge within academic communities that used to work in isolation because of the political boundaries prevailing during the "Cold War" even though they were getting weaker and weaker. Thanks to Tatiana Slama-Cazacu's untiring action, Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish and Russian psycholinguists could compare their own research paradigms with those elaborated by Italian, French,

Spanish, Portuguese, German, Canadian, Brazilian and Japanese psycholinguists. The nationalities I have just mentioned reflect the most relevant and stable groups which have emerged so far.

Our Society's activity drew on the policy of Helsinki Conference that in 1975 led the European peoples to the tight but inevitable (as well as promising) way towards security and cooperation. So far ISAPL has represented a scientific-academic expression of a process of mutual acknowledgement in which several scholars, who were trained in systems of opposed socio-ideological beliefs, could experiment dialogue as the only background suitable to the fulfilment of the most authentic needs of humanity. The triennial Congresses were privileged intervals for the emergence of a collaborative tension between psycholinguists coming from the most different countries. The group of young researchers that I have guided so far in order to arrange the series of meetings and talks which are starting today is completely attuned to ISAPL's tradition. The latter has always attempted to free the researchers' geographical origins from biases due to ideological and political connotation. Being a European city, Bari belongs to North of the world, but it is located in the South of Italy, namely in Apulia, which is generally conceived as a turning door between the East and the West.

Leafing through the proceedings of ISAPL's triennial Congresses, we can discover to what extent scholars and researchers, who have joined the Society in the 30 years of its history, have drawn on its three honorary Presidents' theoretical models: Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, Renzo Titone, and Leonor Scliar Cabral. Such influence is the result not only of impact their ideas have exerted on the institution, but also of the efficient policy they have adopted to guide us towards our research practices. Of course, the inspiring competence of ISAPL's founder is dominant as emerging from the general enhancement of the ideas encompassed in Slama-Cazacu's "dynamic-contextual approach" to the issues concerning human communication. On the behalf of all the memorable members of ISAPL, I want to state clearly that we are indebted and grateful to such great personalities as those of our Honorary Presidents. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, they agreed with conceiving the nature of psycholinguistics as "a multidisciplinary connected science".

This syntagm was the specific title of the 4th Congress which was held 16 years ago in Bologna (June, 23-27, 1994), but also symbolizes the Pole Star leading the papers presented in the other Congresses, especially those held in Caen (2001) and Cieszyn (2004). By tackling the "challenging tasks" posed "in the new Century" to the research practices of psycholinguistics, our Society has marked its constitutive prerogative of developing and empowering a field --that is the vital relation that people establish with their own languages-- not with a refusal to interact with other disciplines, but with an open attitude towards collaboration and mutual interaction. We are very proud to belong to a tradition that, taking on the original interdisciplinary nature of psycholinguistics, has endeavoured to enrich the discipline with multiplicity and integrability of contributions and interests.

In particular, the social representation of pure (or theoretical) psycholinguistics aims at identifying the discipline with a particular field orientation which is consis-

tent with the paradigm of “cognitive science” set in the model of “*Information Processing Theory*”. Mainstream psycholinguistics tends to set out the issue concerning “what people do when they speak” in a monologic frame. In this paradigm the “heteroclitic” phenomenon of language is conceived as a “silent object” separable both from the involved subjectivities and from the global context in which the exchanges occur. Taking into account the way this research line developed in the second half of the twentieth-century, mainstream psycholinguistics completely identified itself with a “naturalistic”, nomothetic, quantitative, and experimental approach.

Contrarily, applied psycholinguists’ approach takes shape in a more complex frame traced by the respectful attitude towards the co-produced sense in scientific research conceived as a special reflective improvement of the dialogic practice concerning human condition. In so far as they may appear as “heretical” (or “romantic”), ISAPL’s members maintain that understanding of “what people do when they speak” can be gradually achieved by actively listening to their own voices and by recreating the rich texture of intentionalities operating in the historical shaping of their enunciation contexts. Since the main commitment of all psycholinguists consists in outlining a “*Meaning Elaboration Theory*”, such goal can be pursued more properly through research practices which are consistent with the programme of a “discursive science”.

3. The topic of our Congress

A column regularly appearing in ISAPL’s historical “Journal” was labeled “Quo vadis Psycholinguistics?” Really psycholinguistic research follows the journey of human beings into the world and shares their destiny. Psycholinguistic research is a process which, both at the socio-economical and at the historical and cultural levels, undergoes several dynamics which can establish a series of ties on individual scholars. But the demanding commitment to the cause must not obscure the disciplinary awareness of the goal which enhances all practices, namely the best understanding of what human beings are and the way they act as speakers-listeners in the real contexts of their lives and actions. The phase we are going through can be evoked by the title itself standing on the Congress posters and revealing its main topic: “Positive, ethical effects of psycholinguistic research today”. Its syntagmatic construction appears rather “disturbing”. Indeed, it is the result of a series of arguments and discussions from the email correspondence among the several members of the Scientific Committee and it involves a complex process of negotiation concerning different research interests and sensitivities.

Certainly, the shared point of junction is the reference to the present. “Today” identifies the unquestionable fact that we are posing our arguments in the year that closes the first decade of the third millennium. I have no fanciful kabbalistic ambition, but the triennial recurrence of our meetings conveys to some dates the function of summing up or of reintroducing a commitment. “Today” is a deictic term stressing both the need for contextualistic references and the relevance of special symbolic

values. The meaning of the term “today” evokes a connotative swarm which shifts from the value of “being informed, updated, alive and sparkling” to the risk of “being ephemeral and absorbed in the present”. However, we have easily agreed about the opportunity that our meeting provides an account for our “today”.

Naturally, “psycholinguistic research” cannot end in a discussion, because it is the constitutive field of our own existence as a community of scholars. Some disagreement emerged as to how to frame the “effects” of our research. On the one hand, some of the members wanted to underline the “positive” evaluation of psycholinguistic commitment in the contemporary world; on the other, some others were interested in highlighting the “ethical” dimension as a horizon able to project the general complexity of language use in the current effort to realize human understanding of the self and the world. The title recalls the comparison between two question points:

- 1) to what extent can psycholinguistic research provide contributions to solving those problems which people and communities must face in their signification and communication practices?
- 2) To what extent psycholinguistic research can contribute to account for that fact that language uses imply inevitable sensitivity to the ethical sphere peculiar to human life?

In conclusion, we thought that it was right to preserve the trace of negotiation for a composition of interests, which is also a regular practice “today”. According to Mikhail Bakhtin’s remarkable insight, the two adjectives that introduce the general topic of our meeting – “positive, ethical” – could evoke the counterpoint of voices animating life sciences and humanities as dialogical sciences. Indeed, they join the ideal-aspirational trace and the tie of the real and concrete condition in which we can detect the “effects” of psycholinguistics research. Recall of the “ethical” value can integrate the regular expectation of the “positive” with a reference to shared normative frames. Indeed, if an agreement on what is “good” and what is “evil” cannot be reached by reflecting on how human beings shape their own world through language, we find out that what is positive for some, may also be negative for the others. But the “ethical” also reminds us that our comprehension of the “positive” cannot be exclusively defined according to criteria of technical functionality, since the concept ought to relate to moral legitimate expectations.

Recalling the ethical horizon of applied psycholinguistics is also a way to be engaged with the validity of the reference theories by which the discipline is inspired with respect to the concrete challenges concerning the social sphere of life. For example, the critical position of applied psycholinguistics in the analysis of political language changes within the general historical contexts. Actually, the political and ideological struggle during the “Cold War” could be examined differently with respect to the debate concerning the positions different political (wo)men have both on the cause and consequences of “global warming”.

The semantic field of ethics is rather general since it covers the set of principles to which people or groups stick in relation to their public and private behaviours. The use of term “ethics” implies a specification since it identifies “the study of morality of human acts, the idea and the grounding of duty and virtue”. The phi-

philosophical meaning of ethics allows us to project a possible moral evaluation on the analysis of human behaviours, thus stressing that in everything human beings do, they express (with more or less awareness) a choice inspired by a series of values shaped on the good/evil axis. The term “ethical” itself only detects the “regularities” recognized through people and communities’ customs and also through their communicative traditions and behaviours. Differently, the term “moral” evokes “the rules” to which people should stick if they want their “customs” – and their communicative behaviours – to be consistent with the principles of goodness and justice as enhanced by the community they belong. Also thanks to the support of philosophical reflection, common speech shows a tendency to assimilate the semantic fields of ethics and morality.

As to the topic of our meeting, many philosophers of the last Century – from Edmund Husserl to Hanna Arendt, from Hans-Georg Gadamer to Emmanuel Levinas and Hans Jonas – have proposed different pathways in order to involve mankind into a “form of life” aiming at reconciling the wish for freedom with the bond of responsibility. The most relevant theoretical framework can be traced in one of the most important contributions to the European critical thought. As it is well known, the great German intellectual Jurgen Habermas elaborated a theory of the communicative action opened to the ethics of discourse. The universal request of reason acting as a regulating strand of cultural behaviours (at economic, political, legal, artistic and religious levels) both leads and obliges human beings to argue their position in an “Ideal Linguistic Situation” (or Discourse) that can represent the specificity of their condition in the world.

Thus, the main question which should animate our arguments sounds as follows: to what extent can psycholinguistics contribute to account for the “ethics of discourse”? Which comprehension models can it specify in order to show the relation between “the doing of the discourse” and “the good/the evil” established by people in situations and institutions where they experience their encounters? To what extent can psycholinguistics research encourage communication processes (among people, groups and cultures) taking into account the ethical ties and the moral expectations related to human discursive practices?

In more general terms, the topic of the IXth Congress lead ISAPL’s members to consider in a critical way the epistemological dimension of their research. After acquiring the awareness that also (applied) psycholinguistics risks to empower values and institutions that can impede many people to live meaningful lives, we need to underwrite the commitment to pave the way for theoretical constructs and methodological procedures which should be able to unveil conditions of dominance and injustice and so as to raise human beings in dignity and autonomy. In brief, we are invited to conceive the science of psycholinguistics as a social resource functional to the achievement of human subjectivities that should be more and more capable of arranging their own “forms of life” in a free yet shared way. A little cue of such a will may be viewed in our choice to support the Regional Project “Women in Prison”, by ordering the beautiful handbags of our Congress from a cooperative firm which helps women to regain their dignity.

4. The structure of our Congress

Each Congress is, in a sense, a new birth for ISAPL: new persons are coming as members, thus giving fresh energy to our association. The last ISAPL birth occurred in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in October 2007. Because of the difficulty to reach the site, it registered a remarkable decrease in the members' participation. This was partially compensated by the numerous presence of scholars coming from the Americas. Indeed, a significant presence of "local" scholars belonging to the Congress hosting country is a widely predictable occurrence. Actually, 58 Italians out of 220 Isapl members are participating in our Congress. The other two large groups of participants are Brazilians (20) and Polish (15) researchers, respectively.

First of all I want to give a collective thank to the invited colleagues who will present the six plenary lectures. Their topics retrace some extremely important paths of psycholinguistic research. Their contributions can not only have positive implications on the general structure of human communication potential, but can also shed light on the texture of the relations between the language use and the ethical dimension of the human world. The plenary speakers will carry the argument out through different degrees of generalizability according to the specific topic of their research and to the theoretical perspective adopted each time. Anyway, all of them have ethical implications which may stand out as a further challenge for psycholinguists' commitment.

In addition to the plenary lectures, other general meetings defined as "round-tables" have been arranged in order to highlight the collaborative nature animating the definition of our issues and topics. The first round-table aims at enhancing the highly appreciated work of Tatiana Slama-Cazacu as "scientist, teacher and humanist". The Scientific Committee of this Congress firmly believes that it is really proper to acknowledge her efforts and to express the most grateful collective thanks to her. The plan of the second round-table derives from similar shared feelings towards ISAPL's second founder and honorary President, that is Renzo Titone, who is entrapped by the infirmities of advanced age. The Scientific Committee also wishes to enhance his symbolic presence entrusting his disciple and colleague, professor Maria Antonietta Pinto, with the task of illustrating the "Journal of Applied Psycholinguistics" that she founded ten years ago thanks to his mentor's impulse. Through her Journal she has collected and preserved his inheritance. Really Titone has been, for half century, one of the earliest psycholinguists and the director of several journals which have contributed remarkably to the academic rooting of psycholinguistics in Italy.

Every day we could attend a symposium out of three and one of the six thematic parallel sessions. As we already know, symposia encompass "top-down" thematic talks arranged with an organizer; instead, "thematic sessions" are "bottom-up" clusters organized by the Scientific Committee by following the individuals' indications. The thematic sessions shape the fields of psycholinguistic research according to consolidated articulations in the tradition of different study programmes. The collected abstracts in our Congress are evidence of the psycholinguists ability to constantly update the topics on the agenda for discussion. The re-

search pathways concerning the connection between Language and Cognition or its general processes of Language Acquisition and Learning or the more specific ones dealing with Reading and Writing show a high level of consistency between theoretical clearness and methodological subtlety in the proposed analyses. These topics reflect the core of the identity of psycholinguistic research, which can orient scholars' interests towards even more specific topics such as "social contexts of language use", translation, language education, plurilinguism. In all these research areas psycholinguists are animated by the ambition to promote the expressive and interactional potential of human beings so that such language practices are a way to carry out projects of personal autonomy and social wellbeing.

5. The moral in our logo

The logo of our Congress activates a series of inter-textual references recalling the classical ambiguous figure known as "Rubin's cup". The latter allows either the figure of a chalice or that of two faces to emerge from the background. It has a great symbolic value since its very ambiguity is the trace of a form of life reflecting the struggle for meaning. In particular, the image can be conceived as the synthetic description of what people do when speaking: they compete for a "cup", with the aim to endorse and share it among themselves. Our logo introduces some important changes in this sense pattern: the world shape has changed into the cup, the faces are oriented towards the attention of mutual gaze, but they are placed in a status of indifference and even non recognition. They say the word 'communication' in many languages to mark their basic need and what they say shapes the famous icon of Internet, namely Communication Mediated by Computer, which becomes more and more the core of our discursive practices. Such a setting of sense making implies many ethical effects, not always positive.

Anyway, the logo of our Congress encompasses in an icon the enunciative situation typical of our age: a world of different discourses, a proliferation of opportunities which can convey sense to reality. The variability of the word and the risks of an increasing general misunderstanding are anchored to the availability of a shared world-system operating in the two-faced Janus of human mind. People, groups, institutions and cultures speak in different languages, but also when their practices do not intersect in the fruitful form of the encounter (face to face), they thematize a world of interests, worries and common ambitions. The ethical horizon of psycholinguistic research that we want to account for by our coming here in Bari- the city of the meeting point between the West and the East and the symbol of the "in-between land"- is traced by the reference to the world value of any enunciative expectation of sense: in the multifaceted aspect of its donation, the word makes itself responsible for the world, it makes itself responsible to save the world.

6. Going to conclude

Sometimes praising and thanking the staff may sound like mere rhetorical modulations. Well, though I am aware of the risk of looking emphatic, I want to use the same solemnity as the one characterizing the maxim “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” in order to say that all of us here today have to “give to Amelia what is Amelia’s”. The whole organization of the IX ISAPL Congress has the wise mark of Professor Amelia Manuti: a tiny and gentle person, but also such determined as the steel and prolific as the dynamo. I am also glad to mention two other people that, together with Amelia, stand for the core – also the legal one – of the Organizing Committee. I am talking about Dr. Rosa Maria Rubino and Dr. Rosa Scardigno. The several qualities they share are encompassed in their common name, but it is especially the efficiency of these two “roses” which makes me update and change the famous line of the medieval logic “Stat rosa pristina nomine” into “Stant Rosae pristinae virtute”. Thanks to the value of their devotion, our group has lived so far an everlasting bloom of ideas. The four musketeers of the limited Committee have found in the action of Professor Annarita Taronna a support that has progressively increased up to become, in the last stages, extraordinarily crucial. As a fine scholar of translation issues, she has been able to transfer to the context of our Congress the knowledge resources she has acquired by organizing other similar events. A special thank also goes to Dr. Valeria Minervini who has promptly taken on webmaster skills and has cared for the virtual efficiency of our website.

Of course, the activities of the people I have mentioned so far would have been much more difficult and untiring if they could not have enjoyed the help and kindness of drs. Pia Fontana, Feldia Loperfido, Mariangela Marchese and Rosa Traversa who have devoted some part of their training in the PhD course in Psychology to face the many concrete implications of our organizing efforts, especially with regard to the creation of the abstract booklet. I also have to mention the students’ contribution of my courses of the *Laurea magistrale* in Psychology and Communication Science –Tiziana Giuffré, Virginia Olivieri, Francesca Pagliara e Ilaria Reggi – who have devoted to ISAPL some time of their training.

As a point of reference of all these people – all young hopes for ISAPL too –, I also want to thank all of you because in the last 18 months our group has frequently gathered to get ready to meet you here. Our meetings have been extraordinary moments of mutual listening with no shadows around us as in a spring day warmed up by the sun with no clouds. I know I am expressing a shared feeling: the search of the conditions for organizing at our best the IXth ISAPL Congress has brought to us “positive and ethical effects”. Indeed, our meetings have always been shaped as growth experiences developing the awareness that the human word can allow the exertion of power and dominance, but has also a potential of modulation opened to recognizing the value of the Other so that nobody is compelled to renounce the legitimate ambitions of the Self.

While waiting for meeting you, we have experimented the light strength of dialogue which makes unique (even if unstable and provisional) the human demand of