

14 Language as information

Chapter 13 led us to a phenomenon that has to be explained. Interlocutors do not have complete freedom in conversation; they must be relevant. We now need to understand how this is done and why it must be done, which will be the subject of this chapter and the following ones.¹ Analysis of how speakers contrive to make messages that are acceptable to their interlocutors will lead us to the observation that they use language in two fundamentally different modes of communication, the origin of which we shall endeavour to grasp. This chapter deals with the first of these two modes, the one which makes for the production of messages perceived as informative. The second one, the argumentative mode, will be discussed in Chapter 15.

14.1 The constraint of relevance in conversation

In relaxed social situations, such as a conversation among friends, we do not have the feeling that our behaviour is strictly constrained. Our impression is that we can say whatever enters our heads and that we speak without giving much thought to what we say. This contrasts markedly with how we try to weigh every word during a tense discussion in a professional setting, for example if the point at issue is the signing of a contract which will have some bearing on our future. In everyday talk we are in a very different situation. For most people, conversing is a pleasure. We speak almost without thinking and the content of what we say comes to us naturally. It appears to be the case, however, that we are actually subject to severe constraints, though most of the time we are unaware of this. One such constraint which is well known is that we cannot skip about from one subject to another. But there is another constraint which restricts

¹ The comments of Laleh Ghadakpour have been of assistance to me in clarifying the ideas set forth in Chapters 14 and 15.