# 1      What Is Universal Pragmatics?*

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The task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding [*Verständigung*].[1] In other contexts one also speaks of "general presuppositions of communication," but I prefer to speak of general presuppositions. of communicative action because I take the type of action aimed at reaching understanding to be fundamental. Thus I start from the assumption (without undertaking to demonstrate it here) that other forms of social action—for example, conflict, competition, strategic action in general—are derivatives of action oriented to reaching understanding [*verständigungsorientiert*]. Furthermore, as language is the specific medium of understanding at the sociocultural stage of evolution, I want to go a step further and single out explicit speech actions from other forms of communicative action. I shall ignore nonverbalized actions and bodily expressions.[2]

## The Validity Basis of Speech

Karl-Otto Apel proposes the following formulation in regard to the general presuppositions of consensual speech actions: to

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identify such presuppositions we must, he thinks, leave the perspective of the observer of behavioral facts and call to mind "what we must necessarily always already presuppose in regard to ourselves and others as normative conditions of the possibility of understanding; and in this sense, what we must necessarily always already have accepted." [3] Apel uses the aprioristic perfect [*immer schon*: always already] and adds the mode of necessity to express the transcendental constraint to which we, as speakers, are subject as soon as we perform or understand or respond to a speech act. In or after the performance of this act, we can become aware that we have involuntarily made certain assumptions, which Apel calls "normative conditions of the possibility of understanding." The addition "normative" may give rise to misunderstanding. Indeed one can say that the general and unavoidable—in this sense transcendental—conditions of possible understanding have a normative content when one has in mind not only the binding character of norms of action or even the binding character of rules in general, but the validity basis of speech across its entire spectrum. To begin, I want to indicate briefly what I mean by "the validity basis of speech."

I shall develop the thesis that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and suppose that they can be vindicated [or redeemed: *einlösen*]. Insofar as he wants to participate in a process of reaching understanding, he cannot avoid raising the following—and indeed precisely the following—validity claims. He claims to be:

   a. *Uttering* something understandably;
   b. Giving [the hearer] *something* to understand;
   c. Making *himself* thereby understandable; and
   d. Coming to an understanding *with another person.*

The speaker must choose a comprehensible [*verständlich*] expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true [*wahr*] proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully [*wahrhaftig*] so that the hearer can believe

the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right [*richtig*] so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with one another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified.

The goal of coming to an understanding [*Verständigung*] is to bring about an agreement [*Einverständnis*] that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness. We can see that the word *understanding* is ambiguous. In its minimal meaning it indicates that two subjects understand a linguistic expression in the same way; its maximal meaning is that between the two there exists an accord concerning the rightness of an utterance in relation to a mutually recognized normative background. In addition, two participants in communication can come to an understanding about something in the world, and they can make their intentions understandable to one another.

If full agreement, embracing all four of these components, were a normal state of linguistic communication, it would not be necessary to analyze the process of understanding from the dynamic perspective of *bringing about* an agreement. The typical states are in the gray areas in between: on the one hand, incomprehension and misunderstanding, intentional and involuntary untruthfulness, concealed and open discord; and, on the other hand, pre-existing or achieved consensus. Coming to an understanding is the process of bringing about an agreement on the presupposed basis of validity claims that can be mutually recognized. In everyday life we start from a background consensus pertaining to those interpretations taken for granted among participants. As soon as this consensus is shaken, and the presupposition that certain validity claims are satisfied (or could be vindicated) is suspended, the task of mutual interpretation is to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can share. If their attempt fails, communicative action cannot be continued. One is then

basically confronted with the alternatives of switching to strategic action, breaking off communication altogether, or recommencing action oriented to reaching understanding at a different level, the level of argumentative speech (for purposes of discursively examining the problematic validity claims, which are now regarded as hypothetical). In what follows, I shall take into consideration only consensual speech actions, leaving aside both discourse and strategic action.

In communicative action participants presuppose that they know what mutual recognition of reciprocally raised validity claims means. If in addition they can rely on a shared definition of the situation and thereupon act consensually, the background consensus includes the following:

a. Speaker and hearer know implicitly that each of them has to raise the aforementioned validity claims if there is to be communication at all (in the sense of action oriented to reaching understanding).

b. Both suppose that they actually do satisfy these presuppositions of communication, that is, that they could justify their validity claims.

c. Thus there is a common conviction that any validity claims raised are either—as in the case of the comprehensibility of the sentences uttered—already vindicated or—as in the case of truth, truthfulness, and rightness—could be vindicated because the sentences, propositions, expressed intentions, and utterances satisfy corresponding adequacy conditions.

Thus I distinguish (1) the *conditions* for the validity of a grammatical sentence, true proposition, truthful intentional expression, or normatively correct utterance suitable to its context, from (2) the *claims* with which speakers demand intersubjective recognition of the well-formedness of a sentence, truth of a proposition, truthfulness of an intentional expression, and rightness of a speech act, and from (3) the *vindication or redemption* of justified validity claims. Vindication means that the proponent, whether through appeal to intuitions and experiences or through argumentation and action consequences, grounds the claim's worthiness to be recognized [or acknowledged: *Anerkennungswürdigkeit*] and brings about a suprasubjective recognition of its validity. In accepting a validity claim raised by the speaker, the hearer acknowledges the validity of symbolic structures; that is,

he acknowledges that a sentence is grammatical, a statement true, an intentional expression truthful, or an utterance correct. The validity of these symbolic structures is grounded in the fact that they satisfy certain adequacy conditions; but the meaning of the validity consists in worthiness to be recognized, that is, in the guarantee that intersubjective recognition can be brought about under suitable conditions.[4]

I have proposed the name *universal pragmatics* for the research program aimed at reconstructing the universal validity basis of speech.[5] I would like now to delimit the theme of this research program in a preliminary way. Thus before passing on (in part II) to the theory of speech acts, I shall prefix a few directorial remarks dealing with (1) a first delimitation of the object domain of the universal pragmatics called for; (2) an elucidation of the procedure of rational reconstruction, in contrast to empirical-analytic procedure in the narrower sense; (3) a few methodological difficulties resulting from the fact that linguistics claims the status of a reconstructive science; and finally (4) the question of whether the universal pragmatics proposed assumes the position of a transcendental reflective theory or that of a reconstructive science with empirical content. I shall restrict myself to directorial remarks because, while these questions are fundamental and deserve to be examined independently, they form only the context of the theme I shall treat and thus must remain in the background.

## Preliminary Delimitation of the Object Domain

In several of his works, Apel has pointed to the abstractive fallacy that underlies the prevailing approach to the logic of science.[6] The logical analysis of language that originated with Carnap focuses primarily on syntactic and semantic properties of linguistic formations. Like structuralist linguistics, it delimits its object domain by first abstracting from the pragmatic properties of language, subsequently introducing the pragmatic dimension in such a way that the constitutive connection between the generative accomplishments of speaking and acting subjects, on the one hand, and the general structures of speech, on the other, cannot come into view. It is certainly legitimate to draw an abstractive