

Unfolding (of) theories, not programmes (programs?)

Tanmoy Bhattacharya

ABSTRACT

I question, provocatively, whether disability studies (DS) as a discipline deserves to be called studies. When a field zeroes in on any claim about ‘realities’, I think, it actually treads on shaky grounds. The general fear of theories necessarily leads to a form of anti-intellectualism that is most often cloaked in an activist’s guise. The question really is how does one release DS from this bondage of pragmatism and practicalities. In this piece, I want to talk about a bit of this and a bit of that, aimlessly. In fact, that is the aim, I think.

My work at Equal Opportunity Cell of the University of Delhi was in many ways an attempt to infuse a component of knowledge, into what is predominantly, a service-oriented enterprise, the UGC mandate itself, making it very clear. So it was not surprising to create a collective where we can establish a kind of dominance of knowledge over service¹.

By 2012, I was already in next stage of my thinking of moving somewhat away from mainstream (Disability Studies) DS to Critical Disability Studies (CDS), this move again was formally reflected in renaming and thereby redefining our collective as CDSI in March, 2018. There were other incidents that worked as a catalyst for this move, which I won’t talk about here.

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There are two linguistic elements in the two sets of parentheses here, *of* and *program* – there is also a bit of Mathematics involved here, the expansions of the two pairs of parentheses are different, whereas opening up the parentheses around *of* reveals a kind of unexpected linguistic phenomenon that changes the message substantially, doing the same

¹ Those who want to know more about the period and my role in it, may refer to my paper “Service and Knowledge: The Emergence of Disability Studies Extension” in: Mehrotra, N. (eds) (2020). *Disability Studies in India*.

around the American spelling ‘program’ with a questions mark, does not uncover any significant linguistic phenomenon but only extends/ shifts the meaning. With the opening up of the parentheses also emerges a third degree of linguistic point of interest in the forward ellipses of both *unfolding* and *of* in the second phrase – these are cases of two separate ellipses, clear from the constituencies. This maybe shown by the full expansion of the conjoined combined big phrase, where underline denotes ellipses:

Unfolding of theories, (and) not unfolding of programmes

This third layer of interest is also about the second phrase (*not programmes*) reflecting/ mimicking the first (*unfolding theories*) in its grammatical category, so if the first is verbal/ nominal, the second one is too.

But let me roll-up a bit and talk about the penultimate point, i.e. of meaning expansion or shift (which I said is not a significant linguistic point, you can take me up on that and I will happily talk for hours).

The word *programme* can be used as a noun or a verb, here of course it is being used as a noun, whether as in the form as in the title or in its expanded versions as above. This is so, in both cases (what these both cases are will become clear when I discuss the next/ previous point) the word *programme* is an “object” inside its own phrase (why quotes around the word object here should also become clear when I discuss the next/ previous point).

In its nominal meaning, one set of uses is in its meaning as “a set of activities/ measures with a particular long-term aim”, which is the usage I meant here. The other dominant usage is the calendar of events usage, which is not relevant here. Yet another usage which has to do with performances or a list thereof, is going to be defunct sooner or later when we won’t have TVs and radios any more or even live performances. So we retain the first meaning usage and note with interest the expressions ‘a set’, ‘activities/ measures’, ‘long-term’, and ‘aim’. If this is clear so far, here’s a task for you all: examine the literature on DS from the 1970’s onwards, and figure out whether each of these 4 expressions appear in them, that is, WHY is social model of disability a model. I am using *programme* in the sense of model here although these have different meaning imports, especially model here is used in the sense of a particular version (normally of a product). The social model of disability therefore always allowed for other versions to appear or even to supersede it

(and they did, e.g. CDS or Disability Justice (DJ) — both focus of my DS reading group). It is not a model in the sense of a replica/ representation or an archetype/ prototype. But is this ‘version’ any way a set of measures/ activities with a long-term aim?

Anyway, to come back to the nominal meaning usages, there is yet another dominant one, which is usually always spelt with the American spelling *program* – as in coding for computers, in the sense of an algorithm. Interestingly, in the meaning we retained for usage, if we impose a sequencing of the measures/ activities, it in fact produces the algorithmic meaning of *program*. However, we do not know of any such sequencing requirement of the set of measures that defines DS.

Now, let us roll-up further to the antepenultimate point that I’ve been holding off all this while – and this is certainly a linguistic point of significance. If you remember, or examine the recoding someday, I said at the start of this interaction “I was ... unfolding theories ...” if you note carefully, here, *unfolding theories* is used as verbal expression. If we do so, that is, use it as a verbal expression, we must also necessarily follow it up with a verbal form of the next expression in title, namely, *not programmes* (meaning, *not unfolding programmes*, whatever that may mean). Note that I maintain this condition in my opening statement as well, although there I modified the following expression as *not looking ... at the programme*.

The point of significance of the first (and linguistically significant) pair of parentheses is revealed now when we discover all of a sudden that the unparenthesicalised expression (let’s call it a phrase now?) has turned into a nominal phrase! We know it’s nominal because we can put an article in front of this: *the unfolding of the theories*, but not so in **I was the unfolding theories*. Convinced? Not yet? Well, observe the following:

- (1) a. The organisation is unfolding theories (= training athletes)
 - *b. The organisation is unfolding of theories (= training of athletes)
- (2) a. The organisation’s unfolding of theories (= training of athletes)
 - b. ??The organisation’s unfolding theories (= training athletes)

That is, one frame cannot be placed in a slot meant for another.

But, you ask, what has changed? That is, going from verbal to nominal, what have we lost/ gained? I will answer this question terms of linguistics too. And that will be the final point (nail) as far as the title is concerned!

Note that in the nominal use (with *of*), we still have the *-ing*. How come? Isn't this a nominal expression? Why do we have a verbal ending then? Well, that's the property of gerunds, as some of you might vaguely/ nostalgically remember the term from your childhood. I won't bore you further with any technicalities, but rather give you an imagery to live with. This *-ing* is like someone has given you wings but you can't fly. Are these wings useless then? Well, if we were to believe the evolutionary fable (it is a fable, believe me), that's exactly the story of wings, they were there but those creatures were not flying (cf. Bhattacharya (2018) "Being Human, Again, Part 2", *neScholar* vol. 4.1, for more on this). *Unfolding* here is like a verb trapped in the body of a noun, it's a lot of trapped energy. And that does something to the import of these special phrases, they are like mini-sentences, aren't they? For example, *Benu's scoring (of) a hat-trick* is like a sentence collapsed into a smaller unit, a phrase (it's equivalent to *Benu scored a hat-trick*). This so-called trapped verbal energy adds to a certain dimension to the phrase, namely, a stative meaning, whereas the verbal phrase (in *I was unfolding theories*) denotes action. The gerund here has type-shifted the meaning import from action to a state. The agency is somehow weakened. This is what we gain from a proper linguistic analysis, a totally new perspective.

This wraps up the fun, linguistic part of the talk and I hope that you had enough of me as a linguist, this is in fact the first time that I have done a bit of linguistics at a disability meeting, the other way round, that is, doing a bit of disability in my linguistics has happened at least once while while talking about sign linguistics. I also hope that I was able to demonstrate the kind of linguistic analysis that informs our disability analysis and yet respects certain core aspects of linguistics (and not simply pick on obscure etymologies of disability terms and peddle it as linguistics). This also raises, I am afraid, a serious issue, which is of certain disciplinary tendencies to use disability as a prosthetic to advance their own disciplinary goals. Again, I afraid that this is tendency is noticed most often in case of English literature discipline, in effect, disability there is seen as a spectacle – yet another exotic topic to latch on to. That is another reason (apart from the oil and water issue that I am going to talk about next) why I am reluctant to do my linguistics in my disability research. The kind of linguistics we do is very different and cannot be wrongly or right

‘advanced’ by ‘using’ disability. It is a bit like Chomsky’s politics and his linguistics, they don’t mix.

References

Bhattacharya, T. (2018). Being Human, Again, Part 2. *neScholar*, 4(1), pp. 44-53.

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