Hieber, Daniel W. 2006. Discourse connectives and pragmatic implications. Term paper, 'Semantics', Prof. Ann M. Reed, Spring 2006, The College of William & Mary.

DISCOURSE CONNECTIVES AND PRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS

BY

DANIEL W. HIEBER

May 10, 2006
Sentence Semantics

Discourse Connectives and Pragmatic Implications

By

Daniel W. Hieber

§1 – Introduction

A prominent question in semantic investigation today is the extent to which contextual information determines the meaning of words, expressions, and units of discourse. How much pragmatics must be included in the realm of semantics to obtain a coherent theory of meaning? Unfortunately, there are as many answers to this question as there are people who ask it. Theories of meaning have proposed everything from an entirely context-dependent analysis (Wittgenstein), to a non-truth conditional semantics (Blakemore 2002), to a completely unrestricted semantics which includes the entirety of our encyclopedic knowledge about words (Jackendoff 2002), to Chomsky's view that semantics deals only with language-world relations and syntax (in a broad sense) deals with everything else.

In light of such conflicted and extensive debate in the literature, this paper has two goals: to briefly organize the debate and clarify its relative points of contention (§2); and to offer several additional considerations through analysis of a specific linguistic phenomenon (discourse connectives) (§3). The result will be a theory of semantics that necessarily includes pragmatic considerations in linguistic meaning (§4).

A final preliminary: I will utilize the traditional proposition-sentence-utterance distinction with a certain amount of exactitude; attention to these details prevents, as I have found, a great deal of confusion when discussing the topic. I shall use the term *expression* to refer ambiguously to all three, implying that what is said for expressions holds also for propositions, sentences, and utterances.

§2 – Defining linguistic meaning

The line between semantics and pragmatics is actually a relatively clear-cut one. Simply, pragmatic meaning is meaning in virtue of the context of an expression, while semantic meaning is the meaning of the word in and of itself. Of course, this latter definition is intentionally vague, for what constitutes the semantic meaning of a word is still a point of open debate. But whatever that semantic meaning *is*, pragmatics deals with the uses that meaning is put to by speakers in context.

The real issue that keeps philosophers of language and semanticists alike arguing is where to draw the line between *linguistic* meaning and other kinds of meaning (namely speaker meaning). The question is not 'where does one draw the line between semantics and pragmatics?' but rather, 'how much pragmatics does it take to get the linguistic meaning of an expression?' Often when the term 'semantic meaning' is used, what is

really meant is *linguistic* meaning. There is a difference, to be sure. This explains what so many linguists, philosophers, and others mean when they ask 'where is the line between semantics and pragmatics?' What they really mean to ask is, 'does linguistic meaning include pragmatic meaning, or is it purely semantic?' (whatever 'purely semantic' may mean).

In order to ask the question, 'how much pragmatic meaning (if any) is contained in the linguistic meaning of an expression?' we must have an understanding of what linguistic meaning actually is.

Intuition tells us that 'linguistic meaning' is the meaning of an expression in virtue of the linguistic elements alone. There are two possible ways to interpret this. The most obvious is that anything non-linguistic (and thus the entire realm of pragmatics) is incapable of contributing to linguistic meaning. This certainly settles the debate quickly—no pragmatics are involved in determining the linguistic meaning of an expression.

Of course, this move has consequences, namely that the linguistic meaning of an expression is of necessity very limited. The linguistic meaning of deictic elements, referents, and broad (inter-sentential) anaphora cannot be explicitly filled out. Instead, the linguistic meaning of these terms must be something like a rule. Take the term *I* for example: its 'linguistic meaning' can be capable of nothing more than assigning a process by which the referent is determined. An example might be, "any use of *I* refers to whoever produced it."[1] However, De Gaynesford (2006) does an excellent job showing how 'Rule Theories' like the above do little more than create problems for themselves

[1] Kaplan (1989: 505) as quoted in De Gaynesford (2006: 12).

and a theory of meaning. Further, such 'hollow' deictic expressions are non-truth conditional in the sense that the conditions necessary for evaluation of their truth cannot be discerned if reliant on their non-contextual meaning alone.[2] Deictic expressions are truth-evaluable only in context. Consider too that verbs require the context of time, and even definite descriptions might not be true if there is no referent at the time of utterance.

Clearly, excluding all things non-linguistic from linguistic meaning severely delimits linguistic meaning. *Purely* linguistic meaning must, by this analysis, be limited to the knowledge that we possess prior to discourse, i.e. both semantics and background knowledge. And since background knowledge is a type of non-linguistic knowledge, and has nothing to do with one's knowledge of English,[3] it too must be thrown out. Consider the example below:

A: Shirley chased the dog with a broom.
B: Shirley chased the dog with a stick.[4]

Both are ambiguous from a syntactic standpoint, but hearers are usually able to interpret A unambiguously. However, without background knowledge, there is no reason not to assume that *both* A and B are ambiguous. Taking the argument even further (and perhaps dangerously close to a *reductio ad absurdum*), it might be said that what a broom is, or what a dog is, are also part of our background knowledge. And it is even part of our background knowledge that we know who Shirley is.

Parsing background knowledge away from linguistic meaning forces us to accept a

[2] While being non-truth conditional creates a problem for us, it is, coincidentally, a move conducive to Blakemore's theory of a non-truth conditional semantics.

[3] This analysis of background knowledge as non-linguistic knowledge is according to Saeed (2003: 181).

[4] Examples adopted from Saeed (2003: 193).

view of semantics which lacks any meaning beyond syntactic relations. The other option is to say that linguistic meaning includes the entirety of one's background knowledge about a word. Jackendoff (2002) agrees with this unrestricted theory of semantics, and offers sound proof in its support.

Whatever meaning winds up being semantic (encyclopedic, definitional, or otherwise), pragmatic meaning must make up the balance. If linguistic meaning is not exhausted by semantic meaning (which it seems it is not), then it requires pragmatic meaning as well. Remembering that there was a second interpretation to the question 'what is linguistic meaning?' we answer again in the same way—meaning in virtue of the linguistic elements alone. But rather than seeing this as an exclusion of all things non-linguistic, perhaps it is better to say that the meaning of the linguistic elements must be *fully fleshed out* in order to reach its linguistic meaning. That is, just giving a semantic definition of the words does not give the 'full' meaning of a word in the usual sense. By full, we mean to say a complete understanding of the word/utterance that may then be used to make implicatures—in other words, the linguistic meaning of an expression is the meaning it has *with all its explicatures in place*. This is because the 'semantic' definition of expressions did not provide a hearer with adequate information for making inferences and implicatures.

This is the definition of linguistic meaning I think we should take—the meaning that an expression has in local context which can then be presented as input to the process of inferential implicature.[5] Taken differently, the linguistic meaning of an expression is the meaning which an utterance has that creates a proposition which may be evaluated as

[5] This follows Sperber & Wilson's (1988; 2004) relevance-theoretic take on implicature.

either true or false. However much context it takes to evaluate the truth conditions of an utterance is how much context we should allow to play a role in determining linguistic meaning.[6]

Blakemore takes issue with this. If pragmatics is supposed to explain both conventional implicature and serve as a component of linguistic meaning, then it is "a pragmatics which spreads across the linguistic/non-linguistic boundary."[7] I however, do not see the problem. So what if pragmatics has a part to play in understanding both linguistic meaning and application of that meaning in context? Traditional definitions of pragmatics have defined it both as competence in how to *use* language, and as the study of how context influences meaning. By analogy, background knowledge is used in both linguistic and non-linguistic meaning as well. Does that mean background knowledge too cannot play a role in linguistic meaning? We have already seen the consequences of that particular move. It seems then that linguistic meaning includes as much contextual information as needed to create a proposition able to enter into the inferential processes of speaker meaning. This would mean that linguistic meaning is both truth conditional and truth-evalauble.

§3 – Implications of discourse connectives for linguistic meaning

The problem with our definition of linguistic meaning is that certain linguistic

[6] It is important to note that this does *not* say that semantics has a pragmatic component, or that it takes pragmatics to adequately define some words. Semantics and pragmatics are still entirely distinct (meaning v. context). However, it *does* say that pragmatic competence is a part of linguistic competence.

[7] Blakemore (2002: 14). Blakemore's motivation for this statement is that pragmatic meaning is non-truth conditional, and if semantics is truth-conditional, then it should be able to accommodate pragmatic meaning. For her, this is justification for saying that *all* semantics is non-truth conditional. Note however that she too has conflated linguistic meaning with semantic.

elements require a great deal more to be truth-evaluable than most linguistic elements, namely, those items which function at the level of discourse.

Blakemore (2002: 1-2) discusses several different types of linguistic discourse entities, such as discourse adverbials (*fortunately, reportedly*) and interjections (*yuk! Oh!*), and—the focus of this portion of the paper—discourse markers, or discourse connectives (*but, and, or, because, although,* and many many others). She notes that what distinguish discourse markers is "their function of marking relationships or connections among units of discourse."[8] Discourse markers themselves are then individually distinguished according to their unique properties. According to Schiffren (1987), those unique properties are three-fold:

1. Discourse slot – what inferences are allowed between elements of discourse limit which discourse connectives may fit in that slot.
2. Indexical function – what type of context the discourse marker is actually marking (this can be in terms of speaker-hearer and/or preceding-following discourse).
3. Linguistic properties – the component of meaning of a discourse marker which remains constant.

As to this last, there is a question of whether that 'core' meaning should be thought of in terms of linguistic meaning or semantic meaning. Soon we will see evidence for which is the case.

This is a drastically oversimplified version of what discourse markers are, and their properties. What makes these discourse connectives particularly difficult for our theory of semantics is their status as syntactic elements, in a very broad sense of syntax. They relate portions of discourse, and thus by conventional analysis are non-truth conditional. Saying that *Sue is tall but Mary is skinny* depends only on the truth value of *Sue is tall*

[8] Blakemore (2002: 2)

and Mary is skinny to determine its truth conditions. Thus the discourse connective *but* is non-truth conditional. In one sense, they are a portion of the syntax made explicit, something akin to there being a word meaning 'X-bar theory has been applied here.'

According to some definitions of pragmatics,[9] discourse markers must be *entirely* pragmatic due to their non-truth conditional nature. But this is clearly false, because discourse markers do have some semantic component (e.g. the connective *but* indicates a contrast between the preceding and following units of discourse). Blakemore (2002) suggests that discourse markers should be included within the realm of semantics because of this, despite being non-truth conditional, even though truth-conditionality is normally considered a basic component of semantic theory. In order to accommodate this, Blakemore suggests that semantic theory itself should accommodate non-truth conditional expressions.

I do not see this move as necessary. First, it may be possible to say that discourse markers (and perhaps discourse-functional expressions in general) are in fact truth-conditional. Unfortunately, an appeal to a "purely syntactic" semantics, in which the only semantic element of a word is its syntactic relations, doesn't really help. For discourse markers show syntactic relations at the discourse level, not the sentence level. And if extremist purely linguistic semantics only contains relations at the level of the sentence, discourse markers would have *no semantic meaning whatsoever*, and this is plainly false. Almost by virtue of definition, words must have some semantic meaning.

It might be possible, of course, to say that broad inter-sentential syntax also counts as

[9] I have in mind Gazdar (1979), who says that PRAGMATICS = MEANING – TRUTH CONDITIONS.

the type of syntax represented by the semantic meaning of discourse markers, but that still leaves us with the undesirable position of a purely syntactic semantics. Such a position gives rise to sticky questions like how we distinguish between different words with the same syntax if all semantics is syntax. Semantic knowledge, it seems, must be encyclopedic. And if this is the case, then the 'core' meaning of the discourse markers must lie somewhere in the realm of semantics, because discourse markers do in fact have an unchanging meaning beyond what is just syntax.

We are brought back to the same problem—if discourse markers have a semantic component to their meaning, but are non-truth conditional, how can a truth-conditional semantics accommodate them? An obvious move is to suggest that perhaps discourse markers *are* truth conditional. This is no easy task, for in order to evaluate the truth conditions of a discourse marker, we must first evaluate the truth conditions of the discourse elements it relates to each other. A T-sentence of *but* might look something like this:

> *[Discourse A] but [Discourse B]* is true iff there is a contrast between discourse A and discourse B, and both discourse A and discourse B are true.

By analogy, this is close to saying '*the bear* is true iff there is a bear', because the definite description 'the bear' posits the existence of an entity, just as the connective *but* posits the existence of a contrast. But of course there is something semantically odd here. It is much easier to say that full sentential expressions have truth values than the expressions within them. However, saying that sub-sentential expressions *correspond* to real world entities is much more sensible, and still adheres to a correspondence theoretic approach to meaning. In this sense, discourse markers *are* truth conditional—they correspond to a salient entity (i.e. contrast), and there is no element that resists truth

conditional treatment.

So far, I have shown that there are at least possible schemas in which linguistic meaning can be viewed as truth-conditional and propositional, and still accommodate discourse connectives into the theory. But one consideration remains which has significant effects on our semantic theory. Blakemore (2002: 19) gives examples that show that while utterances may have complete contextual reference, they *still* fail at creating a fully truth-evaluable proposition. This means that utterances alone (based solely on linguistic elements in full context) are not enough to evaluate truth conditions, even with appropriate context. Consider any elliptical expression:

> We went out for Christmas. It was really nice. But it wasn't the same somehow [the same as Christmas at home].[10]

While the linguistic meaning of this expression and others like it seem to be fulfilled (i.e. fleshed out), its truth conditions may not be. Unfortunately, this means that the definition of linguistic meaning which has worked so well up until now must be adjusted, with possible repercussions on all our previous analyses. If fully explicated linguistic meaning is not enough to create a truth-conditional proposition, then some other sense of implicature based on background knowledge is needed for fully evaluable propositions.

Not coincidentally, we have already said that the semantic meanings of words include encyclopedic or background knowledge. Does this then solve our problem? In saying that the semantic meaning of words includes background knowledge, do we then empower those words with everything they need to create a fully truth-conditional proposition, via

[10] Example taken from Blakemore (2002: 22).

an utterance in context?

Perhaps. Saying that the encyclopedic meaning contained in words allows one to infer the missing pieces of elliptical expressions is terribly close to saying that background knowledge allows one to infer a new proposition from the current one (conventional implicature). However, there *is* a difference. It is the difference between *fleshing out* a current expression and *inferring* an entirely new one.

The inferring of missing pieces of elliptical expressions can thus be considered another form of explicature, as it is based on background knowledge, just as the referents of many nominals and definite descriptions are also explicated by background knowledge.

§4 – Conclusion: implications for the theory

In §2, we discovered that linguistic meaning is propositional and truth-conditional—it provides input to the process of inference which a hearer undergoes to arrive at the speaker meaning. This is of course the expected conclusion—a systematic contrast between linguistic and speaker meaning. Further, we put forth a theory of linguistic meaning which includes pragmatic information, and as much of it as is necessary to make an utterance propositional. In §3 the various properties and consequences that arise from analysis of discourse connectives were tested against that theory. That theory was found to hold, even when it was claimed that utterances in full context fail to produce propositions.

Now it serves to examine how discourse connectives are expected to work in this theory. First, despite the unique quality of the connectives, they act fairly analogously to

most other types of words. They are not immune to needing explicature for disambiguation, for instance. An excellent example of a case when discourse markers need explication is with the use of *or*. Very often *or* is ambiguous between its exclusive and inclusive disjunctive uses. Background knowledge of the situation is usually enough to select one meaning over the other, thus fulfilling the explicature. Then of course, any utterance is capable of undergoing a process of implicature. Discourse markers are no different. For example, a proposition put forth by a fully explicated utterance using the word *but* suggests a contrast between discourse elements. However, if that contrast does not exist, then the proposition is false, and the hearer will undergo a process of inference leading to implicature.

It is clear that discourse connectives operate in ways similar to other expressions. In fact, I would like to propose, following Schiffren (1987), that discourse connectives function as deictic expressions, and operate following the same principles. The pragmatic components which have given semanticists such trouble in placing discourse connectives, namely that they show relations between discourse elements, are really nothing more than indexed context. As stated at the beginning of §3, one of the properties of discourse markers is that they index both preceding and following discourse, and index the discourse in relation to the speaker or hearer. As Schiffren (1987: 326-7) states,

> Because there is an underlying deictic dimension to their functions,…markers provide participation and textual coordinates…It is in this dual sense that markers provide **contextual coordinates** [*sic*] for utterances: they index an utterance to the local contexts in which utterances are produced and in which they are to be interpreted.…And this is what markers are at a more theoretical level of analysis – contextual coordinates.

This is no different than saying a time deictic expression such as *yesterday, now, tomorrow, then*, indexes the discourse in relation to a preceding or following time. Why, then, should we treat discourse markers as any different than time, spatial, or even person

deixis? After all, each of these acts in a manner similar to the connectives, allowing for both explicature to flesh out linguistic meaning, and implicature to flesh out speaker meaning. Our semantic theory very neatly fits against this analysis of discourse markers.

In conclusion, a pragmatic theory of linguistic meaning and an encyclopedic theory of semantic meaning are necessary in order to accommodate the issues that arise from discourse markers. Thus, from the point of view of the discourse connectives at least, this schema is exactly how we should set up our theory of meaning.

REFERENCES

Blakemore, Diane. 2002. *Relevance and linguistic meaning*. Cambridge Studies in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Gaynesford, Maximilian. 2006. *I: The meaning of the first person term*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jackendoff, Ray. 2002. *Foundations of language: Brain, meaning, grammar, evolution*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Saeed, John I. 2003. *Semantics*. 2d ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Schiffren, Deborah. 1987. *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. 1988. *Relevance: Communication and cognition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Original edition, 1986.

_____. 2004. Relevance theory. Chapter 27 of *The handbook of pragmatics*. ed. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward, 607-32. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.